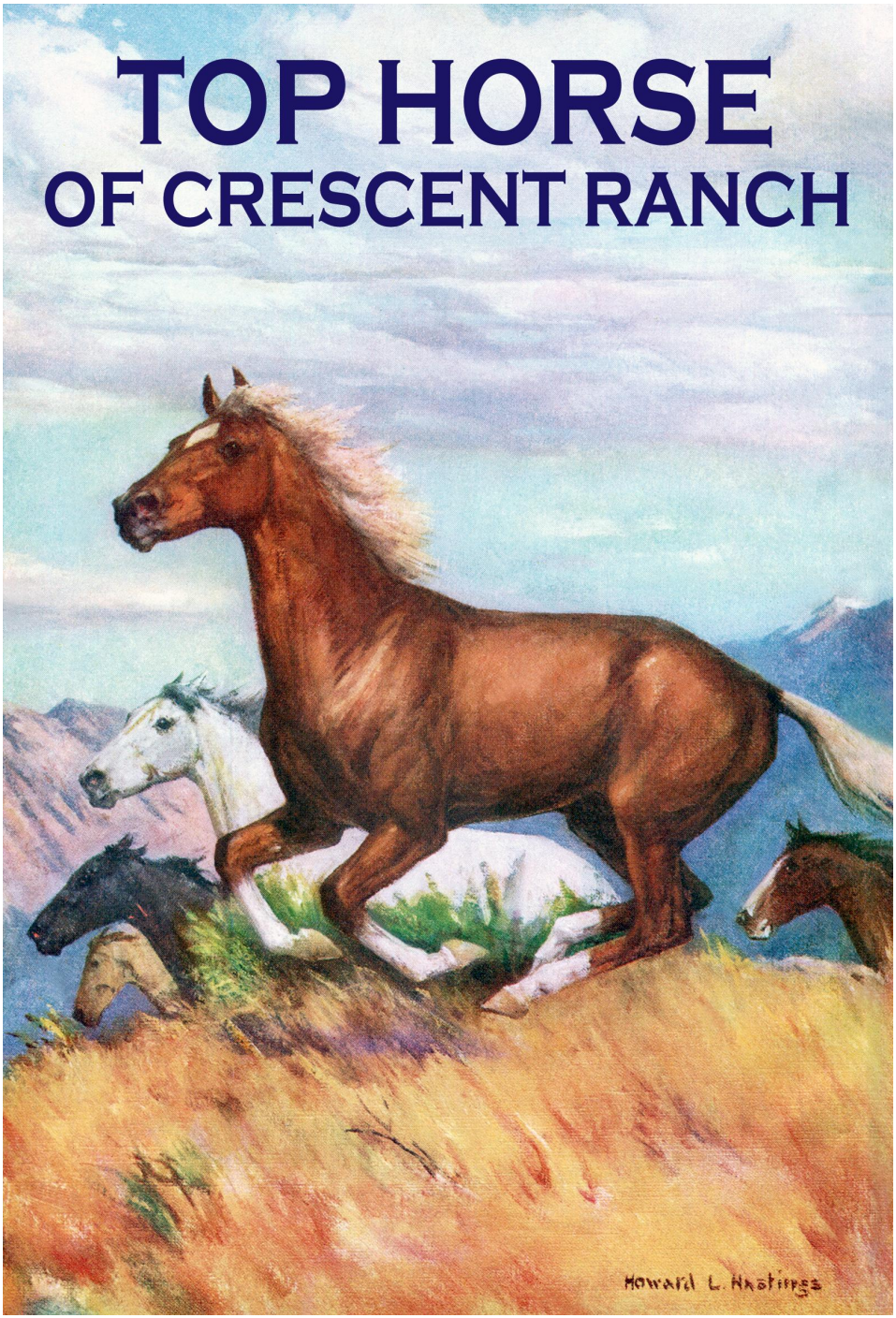
TOP HORSE
OF CRESCENT RANCH



Howard L. Hastings

Frontispiece description

A chestnut horse with four white stockings is running with four other horses, a grey, a black, a dun, and a blaze-faced bay, in dry, straw-colored grass against a backdrop of mountains and a lightly clouded sky.

Signed: Howard L. Hastings.

TOP HORSE

of

CRESCENT RANCH

By

Howard L. Hastings

Illustrated by the Author

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TOP HORSE

of Crescent Ranch

Printed in the United States of America

Dedication

This volume is dedicated to the memory of a chestnut thoroughbred named Sunbeam.

He was this kind of horse: when we were out on all-day trips, I could take off his saddle and bridle and let him graze without a strap or rope to hold him. He would never go more than a few yards away. When the time came to leave, and I picked up the bridle and went towards him, he always came to meet me.

For seventeen years he carried me over hills, through valleys, across fields, and along the ocean's shore. Tens of thousands of miles we traveled together.

He was a true companion.

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1

A Rescue

A pretty chestnut mare stood anxiously over her newborn foal. The little creature was bravely struggling to stand on his wobbly, sprawling legs, while the mother tried to steady it with her soft, warm muzzle against his little shoulders. But in a short time, knobby knees and hocks folded, and the young colt dropped to the ground. After a rest of a few minutes, the plucky foal tried to stand a second time. Then, he fell as before, only to repeat the attempt again and again, each time growing stronger and more sure on his feet. Then he nursed, and the mare's warm milk seemed to send strength to untried, tender muscles. The colt stood now, legs braced widely apart, balancing with much effort.

The mother had not chosen wisely her baby's birth place. At the foot of low cliffs beside a river is a bad spot for a helpless colt after a warm rain in Wyoming. That is the time when melting snows from the mountains lift the waters far above their usual depth. With fear the mare watched the rising current creep nearer and nearer. She was in no danger herself, but well she knew that for at least a day her baby could not climb those cliffs, low and gradual as they were, or brave the force of the river, even with her help. Her uneasiness grew as the day waned and the chill of night approached. Restlessly she trotted along the shore and then back to her foal, urging him to stand, and to move. She searched vainly for a path up the rampart of the cliffs, growing desperate in her fear. Instinct warned her that still warmer weather was to come with more rain, more thawing snow water.

What could the devoted mother do? Had she been a she-wolf, bear, or mountain lioness, she would have tenderly carried her helpless young in her mouth far from danger. But the chestnut mare could do nothing now save stand devotedly by her colt.

Nature has provided that the offspring of those creatures which depend on speed for safety shall be able to travel with their parents a day or two after they are born. By morning the colt could leave with the mare for higher ground. But for the night he must stay

between the cliffs and the river bank, while steadily the strip of dry earth narrowed. Now only a few yards remained and the river rose more rapidly as a heavy shower upstream swelled its volume.

Far away the keen-eyed mare sighted two riders. Up went her head as she neighed, sending the far-carrying call echoing into the distance. Again and still again she whinnied, a frantic quality in the sound. The horses of the riders answered, their neigh coming faintly to her ears.

"Sis, that sounds like a horse in trouble. Wonder what could be wrong?" one of the riders said.

"None of Dad's horses are supposed to be up this way," Helen Stevens answered.

Again the mare's whinny rang over the hills, the riders' horses answering.

"Let's ride over and see what's the matter," Helen said.

"Guess we should," replied her brother, Charlie, as he sent his horse into a canter.

Helen and Charlie Stevens had gone for a long ride and were returning to the ranch. Helen was a graceful, attractive sunbrowned girl, between thirteen and fourteen. She was tall for her age. Her brother, sixteen months younger, was small for his. But he was strong, active, and well versed in all the activities of the out-of-doors. Their father owned several thousand acres of rangeland and bred fine beef cattle and excellent horses. Both children had been raised with horses and dogs as playmates. They loved animals deeply. Gentleness and kindness formed the keynote of their friendly feeling towards all creatures. While they realized that a certain amount of severity and sometimes punishment were necessary in the training of animals for man's use, they never used harsh methods when they could be avoided.

The mare saw the boy and girl riding towards her. She trotted a short distance to meet them, neighing as she came. There was a different note in her call, one of relief. Her fear and anxiety lessened. But because she did not wish to leave her foal for long, as soon as she was sure that the children saw her, she went back to him.

Soon Helen and Charlie were in sight of the colt.

"It's lucky we came," the girl said. "In a half hour that little foal would have been washed away. See how that river is raging. I never saw it higher."

"The warm spell came early this spring, and there was a lot of snow in the mountains," her brother answered.

"We have to do something about that colt. Dad would never want us to leave him here to be drowned," he continued.

"I wouldn't want to, either. I'd rather stay here all night before I would let that happen," Helen replied. "I don't like the way that river is rising. He will be an awfully wet little horse before long."

"Well, Sis, we can't carry him on our horses. He's too lively a critter for that.

"I'll tell you what we will do. I'll wait here with the colt. If I can help it I won't let him be washed away or get into deep water. Or better yet, I'll get him up on a cliff somehow even if I have to haul him up by my lariat with Sundance's help, though that would be pretty rough on the little feller.

"You light out for home and send somebody here with a wagon. I'll have quite a wait but we must save this colt."

Even before her brother had finished speaking, Helen had mounted and at his last words started Gopher on a gallop for the ranch. Her mother saw her coming all alone and thought that something serious had happened to Charlie. She rushed out to meet her daughter as the latter rode into the ranch yard, her horse lathered.

"Nothing terrible has happened, Mother," Helen called when she saw the frightened look on Mrs. Stevens' face. "A very young colt out on the range is in danger of drowning and Charlie is staying to help it. We want Dad to send a wagon and bring the little thing in. The mother is a beautiful mare, a chestnut with light mane and tail, and four white stockings, and the colt is strong and fine. He's worth saving."

Mrs. Stevens' expression changed to one of relief and then of sympathy.

"Father is out at the corrals," she said. "I know he will send help."

Helen lost no time in finding her father.

"You bet, we'll send out a team," he said, his hand on his daughter's shoulder. "No animal around here gets drowned if I can help it. I'll go along, too."

Mr. Stevens called to one of the hands. "Jim, hook up the blacks. And find someone to cool out Helen's horse. He's too good an animal to risk foundering."

"Right, boss," Jim cheerfully answered, as he disappeared into an

open shed. His own son, a lanky, freckled, red-haired chap about fifteen years old, nick-named "Hank," took Gopher and rode him slowly around the corral until the sweat which had soaked him had dried. Then he rubbed him down with handfuls of straw, taking particular pains to dry his back where the saddle had been. It is not always that so much care is given horses in the West, but Mr. Stevens valued and loved his stock and always saw to it that the best treatment possible was given to them.

"All ready, Mr. Stevens," Jim Scudder called. "Want me to drive?"

"All right, if you like. Though, unless you want to go, it's not necessary. Your day's work is supposed to be over and Charlie and I ought to be able to manage a colt less than a day old."

"That's right, boss," Jim replied, a twinkle in his eye. "But I've seen a mighty gentle hoss put you off."

The ranch hand had been in Mr. Stevens' employ for many years and remembered the time when the latter, just come from the East, had regarded all Western horses with suspicion.

"Not lately, Jim," Mr. Stevens replied.

"No, that's correct. But then, come to think of it, we haven't had any mean hosses lately," Jim responded.

"That's right, too," his employer said. "And we won't if I can help it. I believe that a good disposition and gentleness can be bred in a horse the same as speed or conformation. That's what I'm aiming to do. Let's get started," the ranchman concluded.

"Father, let me go, too?" Helen asked.

Mr. Stevens hesitated a second. He had thought that Helen would be quite tired after her long, fast ride. He had not realized what the days in the open had done to build up strength and endurance in his slender, young daughter.

"All right, Sis, if you are sure you want to. Wear something warmer though."

"Thanks, Dad. I'll be ready when you go by the house." Helen ran off to get her warm sweater, climbing aboard the wagon as Jim stopped for her.

2

Help Arrives

The black team was young and full of spirit. The two matched horses trotted out at a good speed. The wagon swayed and jolted, but the two ranchmen, used to that sort of going, took it as a matter of course. Helen, sitting between them, really enjoyed it.

But how was Charlie faring beside the swelling torrent? Scant margin of safety was left now. The mare splashed in the water, anxious, knowing that the boy would help if he could, but not wanting to trust her young baby to him. She had wandered over the ranges for so long that she was half wild herself and had ceased to look to mankind for food or shelter. Yet, she bore the Stevens' turkey track brand and her expression bespoke independence and a love of freedom rather than any trace of viciousness.

The colt now stood in water, only a few inches deep to be sure, but Charlie felt the pull of the current at his feet and knew that in just a few minutes it would sweep the colt downstream unless he could help. He hardly dared leave the little animal to get his lariat from Sundance's saddle. But he must do something, must take a chance. He scrambled up the cliff and unfastened his rope. Sundance had waited patiently, his reins trailing on the ground, for that is in accordance with a Western horse's training.

In the distance Charlie now saw the team as it came over a rise of ground. The black horses were still traveling at a good pace, but they were yet several miles away. The boy yelled and waved his hat, not realizing that his voice never could carry the distance. But his father saw him and stood up in the wagon and waved in reply.

Rope in hand, Charlie returned to the brink of the cliff. One glance, and he dashed headlong down its face.

Was he too late? Out in the mid-current the young colt struggled, not yet knowing how to swim. His devoted mother was beside him, belly deep in the river but somehow unable to get her foal to safety.

Charlie plunged into the water as far out as he dared, for the current tore at him and he must keep his footing if he would save the foal. Seconds were precious. The boy threw his rope, but the

mare was between him and the colt. The loop struck her and almost settled over her head. But fortunately it fell free. Charlie threw again and succeeded in placing his loop squarely over the colt's head.

Now a ticklish job confronted the plucky boy. With a rope tight around the little animal's neck he must drag him ashore. And the colt might so easily drown, for already he had been struggling in the current for quite a while. As the loop tightened around her baby's neck, the mare nudged him along towards Charlie as if she understood that she must keep the little head above the surface.

"Maybe you understand, old girl," Charlie said, as if he thought the horse might get the meaning of his words. "If you will help me, your foal is saved."

And that much needed help the good mare gave. When the current, still rising and growing stronger, swept the foal under its flood, the mare stood downstream and with her head and muzzle against the little body kept the foal's head above water, at the same time lessening the tension on the rope.

So intent was Charlie on his task, that he never realized that he himself was gradually getting into deeper water. He was in well above his waist now. But at last the colt was within reach. In an instant Charlie's arm was around the foal's body. He started back to shore. Strongly, fiercely the torrent tore at him. The boy put forth his utmost strength and gained a few inches. The colt struggled in his arms, almost throwing him off his balance. Had that happened, Charlie could have saved himself, but it would have meant the end of the little animal he was trying so valiantly to rescue. The mare stayed in the water close to her foal but out of Charlie's reach. If good Sundance had been in her place, his master could have grasped a lock of mane or the pommel of the saddle and with his horse's help reached shore. But the mare's intelligence was not sufficient to prompt her to that action.

Charlie was fast losing hope. He simply could not make headway against the current, burdened with the foal. And the river still rose.

Then a shout from the cliff. "Hold it, son!"

Mr. Stevens rushed down the embankment, Helen following. He dashed into the water and lifted the colt from Charlie's arms. To him, a fine, strong man full six feet tall, in the prime of life, the foal's weight was nothing and the torrent's force but slight impediment.

"Good work, boy." His father's praise meant much to Charlie.

"Gosh, Dad, I was afraid I couldn't make it," the boy panted, shivering now in his drenched clothes. "I hated to let the colt drown."

"I'd have hated more to have had you go down the river." Then Mr. Stevens noticed how his son's teeth were chattering, how cold he was. He now had reached the top of the cliffs where Jim waited with the team. Mr. Stevens put the colt on the ground. The little animal stood shakily on its sprawling legs.

"Guess he'll be all right," the ranchman said. "But look, young feller, you get on that Sundance horse and light out for home 'pronto.' Change those soaked clothes and get something warm under your belt. And don't waste any time. No pneumonia in my family if I can help it."

"All right, Dad," Charlie replied. "But take good care of that foal. He's cold and wet, too."

"You bet I will, son, after all the trouble you've had in saving him."

Mr. Stevens laid his hand affectionately on Charlie's shoulder. "Now get along, my boy. We will be home, too, just a little while after you."

Charlie mounted Sundance and galloped off. Soon the motion and exercise brought back some warmth to his body. He let his horse have his head. That good animal, tired of standing inactive so long, and with the thought of home and a good feed to urge him, made time. His master drew him down to a slower pace as he approached the ranch, so that Sundance might not arrive home sweated.

At the ranch the boy soon was warm and dry again, watching for the black team.

After Charlie left, Mr. Stevens and Helen dried the foal as well as they could and wrapped him in a horse blanket. The ranchman then lifted him into the wagon, holding him down so that he could not struggle. Jim started the team homeward.

The mare regarded all these happenings to her foal with anxiety and misgiving. She had no real fear of man, having once been broken to saddle, but she loved her freedom and was reluctant to lose it. And now her baby was being taken from her. Instinctively she felt that the humans who took him did so to save him, that without their aid he would have perished. Motionless, head held high, she watched the wagon disappear in the distance. Her colt was

going and she knew that she was free to follow him, though that would mean once more placing herself under man's dominance.

"Remember the time the cloudburst flooded our camp and our horses scattered when we were in Idaho year before last?" Mr. Stevens asked Jim. "We lost that mare then. You know that she never would let us catch her after she once got away. We left off trying to drive her in, thinking since we were going to be in that locality several days, she would come back herself. She was bred right here on the ranch, but there always has been a streak of wildness in that strain. Not meanness nor ugliness, just a longing for freedom."

"Somehow, I don't blame her for that," Jim commented, thinking how all his own life he had worked for someone else, had taken orders, never really had been his own boss.

But Helen said, "She came home to have her baby. Maybe we will have to raise it ourselves. Its mother seems to have deserted it."

The mare still stood, watching the wagon as it receded in the distance.

At last her mother's instinct conquered her love of freedom. Whinnying, she cantered after the wagon. As she drew near, Mr. Stevens lifted the colt to his feet that his mother might see him. Again she neighed and followed the wagon at a distance to the ranch.

3

Safe for the Night

Charlie, none the worse for his drenching, met the returning party.

"How's the colt?" was his first question.

"Here he is," responded his father as he lifted him from the wagon and carried him into a corral.

"And here he will stay," he added.

"That mother of his is one fine horse. There are both Arabian and thoroughbred blood in her veins, together with a strain of wildness. Some of her ancestors roamed these ranges long before Americans crossed the Mississippi. Indians rode some of 'em and I expect others never saw a man all their lives. It's no surprise to me that she loves her freedom, though she was gentle enough when we had her at the ranch."

"Maybe we can get her back," Helen suggested. "Mother might want to ride her again, and if she doesn't, I'd like to. Gopher is getting a little too small for me."

Mr. Stevens very gently gave his daughter's ear a pinch.

"You mean," he smiled, "you're growing a little too big for Gopher. I doubt if he is changing at all. Well, we will see about that mare. First we have to get her in the corral. Then she will be busy for some time nursing her colt. We wouldn't use her before next fall anyway. Let's move away from the gate and see if she will come in. Now I'm going to change these wet clothes."

The ranchman went to the house while Jim and the children withdrew out of sight within a shed where they could watch without being seen.

The chestnut mare stayed several hundred feet away and neighed, calling her colt. The foal answered with his little, high-pitched, baby whinny. He tried to get to his mother, but bars had been placed across the entrance to the corral, low enough for the mare to step over easily, but an effective barrier for the tiny colt. For a long time the mother kept her distance, constantly whinnying.

"Oh! Can't we let him out?" Helen's pity was touched by the mare's anxiety.

"No, if she won't come in to him we will have to raise him by hand," Jim replied. "He's a very likely specimen. The mare is a mighty good horse. I'd like to know what the foal's father is like. Perhaps he's just a miserable range bronco. If that's the case and the youngster takes after him he probably won't be worth keeping. We'll have to chance that."

Mr. Stevens rejoined the group in the shed. His wife was with him now. Knowing that her own two children were safe and sound and that the colt had been rescued, she had finished some necessary tasks in the house before coming out to learn just what had happened.

The mare watched Mrs. Stevens as she entered the shed.

Helen said, "I'm afraid you two gave us away. That mare won't come in now. She knows we are in here."

"Let me saddle Cyclone and rope her," Charlie urged. "It's getting dark and that colt needs his supper."

"No, son," Mrs. Stevens objected. "We won't run that mare. It's less than a day after her foal was born. I guess maybe it's up to us to feed that young horse."

While she spoke, Mrs. Stevens had been watching the mare intently. Turning to her husband she asked, "Walter, isn't that Betsy, the horse I used to ride? It must be quite a time ago, maybe summer before last."

Mr. Stevens smiled. "Well, Alice," he answered, "I was wondering if you would recognize her. She certainly is your old Betsy and I'm glad to see her again. She was one of the most likeable horses we've ever owned, always gentle and willing. She would keep on going long after many of the other horses that we owned were dead tired."

"Now that we recognize her, I wonder if she remembers me," Mrs. Stevens said. "Walter, remember how she used to follow me around camp for a bit of bread or a little sugar?

"Charlie, get me a few handfuls of oats. I'll bet the mare will come in to me. Horses don't forget. They have good memories."

The boy brought his mother the oats.

"Now, you all stay out of sight. Just keep that colt there in the corral, so its mother can see it. Leave the rest to me. That mare is going to follow me right into the corral."

Mrs. Stevens walked towards the horse holding a measure of oats invitingly before her, and talking to the mare as she used to do when that animal had been her mount.

The mare stood still, head raised, ears pricked forward as Mrs. Stevens approached her. It seemed certain that she recognized her old mistress. Twice she started hesitatingly to meet her, attracted by the kind voice probably more than by the oats. Betsy had been on her own for so long a time that it was doubtful if oats, to her, were more than a faint memory. But Betsy allowed Mrs. Stevens to come only so near. Then she trotted away.

Now it was growing dark and a cold wind was blowing down from the mountains.

"We had better wait until morning," Mr. Stevens called. "Betsy won't go far away tonight."

Mrs. Stevens agreed that her husband was probably right as she retraced her steps to the corral.

4

Under Shelter

By this time the colt had grown stronger and by dint of much effort was able to stand, though shakily, to be sure. His coat of short, dense, soft, fine hair, was brown in color. White "stockings" on both front legs came nearly to his knees, and on his hind feet white "socks" reached about halfway to his hocks. A symmetrical diamond-shaped blaze marked his forehead and added greatly to the attractiveness of his little head. A stubby mane and six inches of short-haired tail, both light in color, showed that the colt would resemble his mother. Betsy's mane and tail were a creamy white.

"He'll be a beauty," Helen said as she stroked the colt. "Now let's make him comfortable for the night."

"Yes, it has been quite a day for a newborn foal. Walter, where shall we put him?" Mrs. Stevens asked her husband.

"Cowbarn's the tightest place and warmest," the ranchman answered.

"I'll make him a bed in a corner of it," Charlie volunteered. "And I'll take some boards or something and fix up a little stall so he'll have to stay in the bed I make. I'll use plenty of straw."

Soon the colt was settled for the night in the shed which sheltered Clover and Daisy, the two milk cows, and Tillie the heifer. After a minute or two he stretched out in the deep straw apparently quite at home.

"Shouldn't we feed him tonight?" Helen asked. "Guess some of Clover's milk would taste good to a hungry foal."

"We'd better let him rest now," Mr. Stevens replied. "Maybe we can get Betsy in tomorrow morning and keep her in the corral until warmer weather and the green grass come. Now let's go in to supper."

Meanwhile out on the open range, swept now by an icy wind, the mother mare circled the ranch, whinnying yearningly. Darkness had spread over the western sky and presently high flying, fine clouds first dimmed and then hid the stars. The temperature dropped while the wind continued its steady sweep. In the cozy

ranch dining room the Stevens family were finishing their dessert. The wind rattled the windows and sent cold drafts along the floor.

"Aren't you glad the colt isn't out there now?" Helen asked. "But listen to poor Betsy!"

Her neigh was audible even above the roar of the wind.

"She's terribly lonesome," Mrs. Stevens said. "But it's her own choice. We gave her every chance to come in. She should be thankful to know that her foal is alive and comfortable, not swept down the river. It was stupid of her to stay away."

Mrs. Stevens was a bit disappointed over her failure to bring Betsy into the corral.

"Charlie, in the morning you'd better drive in that mare. Just don't push her too hard," the ranchman advised.

"I'll help," Helen volunteered. "Maybe we'd better get Hank to go along too. Perhaps three of us can sort of surround her."

"If Betsy has any of her old speed left you won't drive her with any horse I have here now, unless we use Arrow. He's faster than she was at his age," said Helen's father.

Arrow was a three-year-old stallion, full brother to Betsy. He had been broken to the saddle but not trained for work with the stock.

"Do you think our new colt will ever be as fast as Arrow? He can fly," Charlie was picturing a race between the two horses, he on one of them.

"Someday we may find out," Mrs. Stevens replied. And there was a prophecy in that sentence.

Bedtime comes early for folks in the ranch country. Soon after the Stevens family were asleep the storm broke, one of those late snows that covers the ground to a depth of ten or twelve inches, but which soon melts. As the snow fell the wind subsided. No one was awake except Helen. She thought of Betsy out in the cold. She would be lonely, grieving for her colt. This kept her awake. Something prompted her to get up and look out of the window.

Astonished, she saw Betsy at the corral gate, the bars of which had been left down. The mare seemed on the point of entering, though fearfully.

Thought Helen, "Now's my chance!"

Quickly donning some warm clothes, the girl silently went downstairs. Looking out of the window again, she saw that the mare had now entered the corral and stood looking into the shed where last she had seen her colt. Helen knew that there was little

chance of her reaching the corral from the house without Betsy's seeing her, even with the partial concealment of the falling snow. And as the kind-hearted girl feared, the mare caught sight of her before she was halfway to the corral. She whinnied softly in recognition as if glad that a human friend had come to restore her foal to her. With head high Betsy took a few steps toward Helen, then stood waiting.

Helen was at the corral gate now. She lifted one of the bars to close the entrance. But the bar, a lodgepole pine sapling four or five inches in diameter and about twelve feet long, was too heavy for her to manage efficiently. She had to let one end rest on the ground while she slipped the other end between the uprights intended to hold it up.

The sight of her way to freedom being closed was too much for Betsy. Even as Helen reached down to lift the other end of the bar and slip it into place, the mare sprang forward, rushed past the girl and disappeared in the storm.

"You foolish, foolish horse!" Helen almost wept in her disappointment.

"Well, tomorrow we will get you. I won't worry about you again tonight. Your foal is safe and you won't freeze. It's not cold enough for that."

Mrs. Stevens had wakened. She met her daughter as she ascended the stairs. Helen told her mother what had happened.

"Go back to bed again, dear. And this time go to sleep. I'm certain Betsy won't leave the neighborhood," Mrs. Stevens comforted her daughter.

5

His First Breakfast

Next morning the snow was still falling thickly, a wet clinging snow that lay eight inches deep and was still piling up.

As soon as they had dressed, Helen and Charlie were in the cow shed to see how the colt had fared during the night. Hank was there, too, just starting to milk.

"Looks like your orphan child is doing all right," Hank said, as the colt, now steady on his feet, though a little uncertain as to which way he might be going, raised his head over the side of the stall Charlie had improvised.

"Just wait until I get some fresh, warm milk and we'll see about feeding him," the boy continued, as he started towards Clover. "It's no trick at all to get a young colt started with a bottle if he's hungry enough. And in just a little while he'll be drinking out of a pail."

"First we'll have to fix up a bottle. I'll see what Mother can do." Helen left to find her.

Mrs. Stevens smiled when Helen told her what she wanted.

"Yes," she said, "I've saved a couple of your baby bottles for just this sort of thing. You'll find a bottle and everything on the top shelf of the hall closet, in a red cardboard box."

In just a minute Helen was back in the cow shed. By now Hank had some warm milk, which he poured into the bottle. Charlie opened the colt's mouth a little, put a spoonful of milk in it, then held the nipple to its lips. Instinct and hunger did the rest. There was nothing to it.

"Now we don't care if old Betsy doesn't come back," Helen said as the foal sucked away lustily.

Just then Mr. Stevens entered and chuckled when he saw how successfully the children had managed.

"He'll be a much better horse if he has his mother," he said. "We'd better try to bring her in. Come to breakfast now. Maybe the snow will stop in a short time and you can start your search."

"We'll start anyway," Charlie answered. "Who's afraid of a little snow? And we couldn't get lost riding Sundance and Gopher. They

would always find the way home."

"All right. If you want to go," the father consented.

After breakfast Charlie and Helen put on their riding clothes, eager to start the hunt for the truant Betsy.

"It's not much use," their father remonstrated. "You couldn't see a horse a hundred feet away. And from the way Betsy is acting I doubt if she will allow you to get that close."

"Dad, let us try," Charlie urged. "Hank won't have to go if he doesn't want to. We might be lucky."

"All right," the ranchman agreed. "You won't be happy if I say 'no.'"

So the brother and sister went out again to interview Hank. That young fellow wasn't exactly enthusiastic over the prospect of a long ride in a snow storm. But Charlie had always said that Hank was a good egg.

"Sure, I'll go help you," Hank replied after a little coaxing from Helen. "Reckon I can take what you kids can."

6

Action on the Side

So in a short time the three young folks were mounted and on their way.

A slight argument had arisen about the horse Hank rode, a white-faced black with a mean look. Hank had noticed that the cinch ring had started to rub a raw, sore spot, on his own horse, a piebald. He had asked his father what he thought about using the piebald for the trip.

"Son, just as sure as I'm standing here, if you ride that 'paint hoss' today and get that cinch all wet, as you're bound to do, you'll have a bad sore there. Then you won't ride your horse for a month," Jim Scudder, Hank's father, said, as he examined the piebald, whose name was Calico.

"And you know how particular the boss is about sore backs and things like that," Scudder continued.

"O.K., Dad. Let me have your horse?" Hank asked.

"Nothing doing," Hank's father had said. "I need him myself."

So Hank had to take the white-faced black. Nobody liked him particularly. He was usually kept at the ranch because of his cleverness in working cattle, his almost uncanny ability in hunting down strays, and because he was completely game and would go anywhere or do anything he was asked to do. Nobody had really ever bothered to name him but had just called him "that white-faced black."

Hank had not wanted to ride the W.F.B. He had noticed a devilish look in that animal's eye, which caused him some misgiving. But there was nothing else at the ranch then which he could use.

"He ought to be just the horse for us today." Helen was rather pleased to have him along. "Remember how he found that bunch of steers Dad thought had been rustled last fall?"

"Yeah," Hank had answered. "But I'd just as soon someone else rode him."

Hank was a good horseman and not afraid. But now he sensed in the horse under him a nervousness, a feeling of resentment at being

put to work again after a winter of comparative idleness. He just didn't trust the W.F.B. as he did his own Calico.

A flock of sage grouse flushed out of the snow-covered brush before the three riders. A sage grouse is a big bird. Next to the wild turkey it is the largest upland game bird in the United States. And it rises with a great whirring of wings. But no range-bred horse would be frightened by it. Gopher and Sundance were not. So what the White-Faced Black did can be put down for just an "act." He was looking for an excuse to "blow up."

His head went down between his knees and his heels came up, and he bucked stiff-legged to the right and whirled and bucked to the left. He reared until he nearly fell over backwards, then landed with a jolt on his forefeet and kicked skyward. Hank stayed with him.

For a moment the black stood feet braced apart, nostrils flaring, eyes showing white rims.

"Round one," said Charlie. "That was a draw."

And before Hank could think of an appropriate reply, the second round began. Bigger, better and faster bucks and plunges! Hank had to grasp the saddle horn to stay on.

And then when the black came to one of his characteristic pauses, Charlie said, "Round two, favor of the bronc! Hank, you pulled leather."

"Who's riding this horse!" shouted Hank, as the third round began.

The second round was good. This third was better. And as Hank pulled leather the second time—

"Ain't fair!" yelled the White-Faced Black. "Let go that horn!"

And he jumped forty feet skyward and turned a complete somersault, landed stiff-legged, jumped twenty feet to the left, then thirty-one feet to the right, whirled at the rate of forty revolutions per second.

"And then," said Hank, "just as that ornery cayuse was getting ready to jump forty or fifty feet straight up and do a double somersault, I decided to dismount."[*]

"Only I landed on the wrong end, on my head. Look at this Stetson!"

"That's that," said Hank as he scrambled to his feet, brushing off the snow. "Now that horse will be good for a month."

"Are you all right? No broken bones?" Helen asked anxiously.

"Sure he's O.K." Charlie said. "Couldn't hurt Hank by a little fall

like that." Charlie hid his real feelings behind banter. He had been just as worried as his sister, and he knew enough about bucking horses to realize that the W.F.B. had staged as mean and vicious a performance as one would see in many a rodeo.

"Someday, Hank, I'll have to teach you how to ride," Charlie chided.

"Nope," answered Hank. "Someday I'll have to teach that bronc how to buck."

"That's the stuff, boy. Always said you were a good egg." This was Charlie's reply.

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[*] We quote Hank as he told the story to his father later. If he appears to exaggerate don't hold it against him.

7

Home Again

The White-Faced Black, for all his occasional wildness, was a well-broken horse. Now with the reins dragging on the ground he stood quietly, as a western horse is trained to do. Looking at him one would think that anybody could ride him, which was the case until he decided to cut loose again. That's why folks didn't want him.

Hank remounted and the three youngsters resumed their search for Betsy. After about two miles of travel they cut across the track of a lone horse, an unshod horse who carried no rider, as was indicated by the way the footprints lead through brush and under branches which a man mounted would have avoided.

"Those ought to be Betsy's tracks." Charlie reined in Sundance. "Look! Here's where she stood and listened to us. And see! Now she's decided to light out."

"She's not far ahead anyway," Hank agreed. "But your Dad was right about our not being able to see a hundred feet. Can't see fifty."

"Looks to me as if it were snowing harder. Certainly the flakes are bigger," Helen said. "Let's follow the tracks."

The riders turned their mounts, putting them to a canter. Instantly the White-Faced Black changed. Now he had a job to do. Ears forward, head up, without guidance he followed the tracks, seeming to know what was expected of him. He had hunted strays before. Soon it was evident that the horse the three youngsters were following knew that it was being pursued.

"Maybe it isn't Betsy." Helen noticed the longer spacing of the footprints showing increasing speed. "See, the trail leads away from the ranch."

"Don't know what other horse it would be," Hank said. "All your Dad's horses, except those he has up to use this winter are down on the river bottom where there's some grass. Pickings are pretty slim around here in this sagebrush."

"That horse is traveling faster than we are. Shall we speed it up?" Charlie asked.

"If it's Betsy, Dad wouldn't want us to run her. I wish we could see

for sure," Helen replied.

While they had been talking the three riders had not realized that their horses had gradually increased their pace until now they were almost in a full gallop. Perhaps Hank did know how fast they were traveling, but if he did, he made no effort to pull down the White-Faced Black. All were enjoying this run through the snow, the flakes flying against red cheeks. There was an exhilaration, an excitement which for a moment made the three forget the reason for their ride.

But the W.F.B. remembered. He followed the trail without urging, without a touch on the reins.

Helen was the first to realize their speed. "This isn't a race!" she exclaimed, slowing Gopher to a canter. "Betsy would have to do some running to keep ahead of us."

The tracks of the horse ahead had swung in a wide half circle. Now they were headed towards the Crescent Ranch. The snow had almost ceased. Just a few drifting flakes diminished visibility. Presently, even those were gone, and the rolling, sagebrush-covered land spread in clear beauty before the three youngsters. From the elevation on which they rode they could see the ranch two miles away. And cantering towards it far ahead was Betsy.

Helen, Charlie, and Hank reined in their horses to a walk. No use now of chasing the mare in. She had decided for herself.

Mrs. Stevens was busy with the housework when she heard Betsy's neigh. Looking out of the window she saw the mare. Quickly getting a few lumps of sugar and a piece of bread from the dining room table, she went out to meet the returning horse. Without hesitation Betsy came to her mistress, reaching as of old for the sugar and bread.

"So you've come back after all, old girl," said Mrs. Stevens joyfully. "Well, let's go to the corral and see your child."

Meanwhile the three riders had been galloping towards the ranch eager to see the reunion between Betsy and the colt. The mare freely followed Mrs. Stevens into the corral, watched the bars being placed across the entrance seemingly without misgiving. Purposely Mrs. Stevens delayed bringing out the colt until the three riders had arrived. They were out of sight from the corral, hidden by a low hill. But now they came in sight and with a shout and a waving of hats tore towards the ranch.

Hank was first, for the White-Faced Black was a bigger and faster horse than either Gopher or Sundance, who had been selected for

good nature and reliability rather than speed and spirit. But the others were not far behind and all were soon in the corral. Charlie brought a measure of oats and offered them to Betsy. But the mare wasn't interested in food just then. She had kept up a constant low whinnying, looking this way and that, knowing that somewhere in the building adjacent her foal was housed. But no sound came from the colt. After all he was only a day old and had been with his mother just a few hours before the flood almost washed him away.

"Bring out the colt," Mrs. Stevens then said. "It's a shame to keep this anxious mother waiting any longer. Who wants that job?"

Naturally, all three wished to do that, and a friendly argument arose. Mrs. Stevens decided it by suggesting that all three youngsters go into the cow shed for the foal. Hank fashioned a little hackamore out of a short end of rope and slipped it over the colt's head. Charlie took apart his improvised stall and Helen led the little animal out into the snow and around to the corral.

Betsy whinnied with gladness at the sight of her baby. She nudged him with her soft muzzle.

"Take him into the shed, Helen," Mrs. Stevens suggested. "I guess he could use some more breakfast." Soon the colt was busily getting a warm meal in the way nature intended. Hank and Charlie placed a deep layer of straw on the ground in the shed, into which the sun was pouring. Then they fastened some rails across the open front, low enough for Betsy to step over but too high for the colt to manage. A barrier of less than two feet sufficed.

"Mustn't let him out in the snow," Helen advised. "And to think that less than a day ago he was a poor, forlorn, little thing all wet and cold and miserable."

8

Naming the Colt

Betsy's colt had been born early, a full month sooner than most ranchmen want their foals to come. Generally on a horse ranch, broodmares and foals run together on some range where grass and water and a certain amount of shelter are available. The young foals are hardy little things and stand exposure to the elements without harm, for the rolling ranch lands east of the Rockies are a dry country. Storms in the warmer months are neither frequent nor prolonged. Thunder showers provide most of what rain falls. Melting snows in the higher mountains keep the streams running, though as the season advances, if a drought comes, the smaller ones often go dry. Then, of course, stock must be moved to places where water still may be found.

Mr. Stevens stood looking at Betsy's foal, while his wife stroked and talked to the mare.

"Maybe it would be just as good for the little feller to turn him out with the rest in a week or so." He wasn't at all sure he meant what he said. "Don't like to pamper a horse too much. And I know if I let this colt stay around, you and the kids will make a house pet of him."

"Perhaps, if we did that, Walter, the wild streak which Betsy shows would never develop in her colt," Mrs. Stevens replied.

"Anyway, it would be fun for a change to train a horse in the eastern way, from colthood, not to start to work on him when he's three or four years old, practically full grown. Then it's make or break in a battle where anything can happen, even the death of the rider."

It's still the practice in the west to let horses run free until they are old enough to be ridden and then to saddle them by any means possible, blindfolded or tied hard and fast to a pole, or even in a chute. Then a "bronco-buster" mounts and the war between horse and man is on. It speaks much for the inherent good nature and intelligence of the average horse that a high percentage of horses broken by this method turn out well. Some are killed or badly injured and some become so vicious and so savage that they turn

into outlaws, safe for no man to ride.

"Well." Mr. Stevens finally consented, "It will be good for Helen and Charlie to have a colt to work on. Looks to me as if Betsy has given us a good one, too. I'd like to know what his sire was."

So it was decided that Betsy and her foal should stay near the ranch, which meant daily contact with the family and much attention from Helen and Charlie. The latter had considered the colt his own by virtue of his having rescued him from drowning.

"I had a hand in that rescue, too," Helen had claimed. "Didn't I ride for help, and didn't that help come just in the nick of time?"

Charlie had to admit the strength of that argument.

"O.K., Sis," he had cheerfully agreed, "we'll raise him together."

"No, I'm willing to leave that job to Betsy. She seems to be doing pretty well at it," Helen replied. "But now we must find a name that will fit the colt."

"We want a name that will stick and that will mean something," her brother rejoined.

After that late season storm the wind blew gently from the south, a warm wind which, together with the mid-April sunshine, licked up the snow. By noon of the second day after its fall, all trace of snow had vanished.

Mrs. Stevens joined her children. "It looks now as if spring has really arrived," she announced. "There are two bluebirds!"

They were mountain bluebirds which are a beautiful cerulean blue from crown to tail feathers. They take the place of the eastern bluebird, with its red breast, in the Rockies and their foothills.

"We are trying to find a good name for the colt," Helen told her mother. "A name that has some character. Could you suggest one?"

"Let's get our horses and take a ride," the mother proposed. "Then perhaps one will come to us. We don't have to hurry about it."

Helen and Charlie were already in their riding togs. Perhaps according to eastern styles these were not much to look at. They were just rather tight-fitting blue jeans reinforced where needed for riding, high-heeled boots that came only halfway to the knee, wool shirts; and since the weather was still cool, leather jackets and the broad-brimmed Stetson hat.

Charlie saddled Whirlwind, his mother's horse, while she was changing her clothes. Helen disdained help. She could saddle her own gentle little Gopher in the dark if she had to. Betsy, with her

head over the corral fence whinnied as the two youngsters and their mother rode past the corral.

Mrs. Stevens reined in to stroke the mare's soft muzzle. The colt was at Betsy's side, strong now and sure on his feet.

"Would you like to go with us, old girl? Do you find that corral small after all your months of freedom?"

Mrs. Stevens turned to Charlie. "Throw your rope over Betsy's head. We'll lead her out to the cow pasture and leave her there until we come back. It's sunny and sheltered and it will do her good to have a little more exercise than she gets in the corral.

"Look at that little scamp!" Mrs. Stevens exclaimed, as Betsy's foal trotted out of the corral and then broke into a stiff-legged gallop and raced away, only to return to his mother again after he had gone about fifty feet.

"With his early start he will be pretty husky by the time the rest of the colts are born. But he had a close shave," Charlie said.

"Now we simply must name him." Helen felt that the foal had been nameless long enough. "He mustn't grow up and be just 'the colt.' What will we do when the rest of the mares have their foals?"

"I know." Charlie had a bright idea. "Let's call him 'Stilts.' We've never had a horse by that name."

Mrs. Stevens smiled. "'Stilts' would fit him now all right. Those long legs with their white stockings remind you of stilts. And the colt moves almost as if he were on stilts. But that name wouldn't fit him when he's two years old."

"I should hope not!" Helen indignantly answered. "That foal won't grow into a gangling long-legged horse. He's going to be good."

"All right, you think up one." Charlie, too, thought that perhaps "Stilts" might be a name good enough for an ordinary horse but not for Betsy's foal which he had rescued at the risk of his own life—almost.

All three riders waited at the pasture bars after Betsy had been turned loose. She showed her joy at being out of the corral. Tossing her head so that her mane flew in the warm breeze, she trotted about until, finding a place to her liking, she pawed the ground a few times then, folding her legs beneath her, lay down and rolled. Scrambling to her feet again Betsy shook herself much as a dog shakes himself after a swim. Earth fell from the mare's heavy winter coat, so long that one could bury his fingers in it.

"That may not have improved your appearance, old girl," Mrs. Stevens said, "But I bet it felt good.

"Now let's go for our ride."

Helen, Charlie and their mother left the ranch for one of their favorite trips down along the river up through a forest of lodgepole pines.

Wild ducks disported in the river, mallards for the most part, bound for their resting grounds north of the border. The appearance of humans interrupted the drakes' courtship antics, and flock after flock sprang into the air to fly in a great circle and settle again on the river at a point behind the riders. The ducks seemed to sense that at this time, in their spring migration, they would not be hunted.

A wide V of Canada geese winged northward high overhead, calling their "*honk* a *honk*" as they traveled with slow wing beat but deceptive speed, and a smaller flock of snow geese nearer the horizon flashed white in the sun. Red-winged blackbirds called from a marsh at the river's edge, and two western meadowlarks sent forth their clear, rich notes to each other over the rolling prairie. And from the hillside at a distance three prong-horned antelope watched, careless of being seen as long as they knew their matchless speed would take them out of danger, though danger seldom threatened them on the Crescent Ranch. Mr. Stevens never allowed them to be hunted on his broad lands.

The full tide of the returning warmth and life had set in. Moved by the same impulse, Mrs. Stevens and her two children stopped their horses, just to enjoy the sunshine and the warm gentle southern breeze and the movement of all the wildlife about them.

"Springtime!" Mrs. Stevens exclaimed. "Why, that's it—let's name our colt 'Springtime.'"

"Fine, Mother." Helen liked the name.

"Sounds good," Charlie agreed. "But what shall we call him for short, as a nickname? You don't call that horse you're on 'Whirlwind' though that's what he's down as in the ranch book. You call him 'Windy.'

"'Springtime's' all right though. Better than my 'Stilts.'"

"Let's keep that name in mind anyway," Helen said.

Clouds had come up on the south wind and now the intense blue of the earlier morning sky was partially covered. Patches of sunlight shone through the clouds moving over the landscape from horizon

to horizon. It was fascinating and beautiful to watch them. Helen and Charlie tried to ride in the middle of one of these sunny patches and found that Gopher and Sundance had to gallop to stay there. Running their best the horses could cover ground a little faster than the sun patch.

"Doesn't seem as if the wind was that strong," Charlie said to his mother. "Sundance can run a mile in a little less than two minutes, maybe in one and three-quarters."

He figured to himself for a second or two. "It would take about a thirty-five mile an hour wind to move clouds that fast. Can't be right!" And he looked up at the clouds.

"Probably there's a stronger wind up there where the clouds are," Mrs. Stevens explained. "That's often the way."

Now the Crescent Ranch was in sight. And Betsy stood in the pasture watching. As the riders approached she whinnied and all three horses broke into a canter.

A patch of sunlight played through the clouds and as Betsy and her foal trotted towards the homecomers it spread over them. Mare and colt were in brilliant light, surrounded by cloud shadow.

Helen had a quick inspiration. "Oh! Let's call him 'Sunlight!'" she exclaimed.

"And 'Sunny' for short," Charlie answered.

"It couldn't be better," the mother agreed.

9

Table Mountain

April merged into May and May into June. Sunlight thrived, grew taller. Betsy's thick winter hair fell out and now she glistened in a new, sleek, glossy coat which the sun turned to gold. Her colt still kept his youngster's coat, short, without the sheen of an older horse's. The shining, sleek hair would not come until his second summer. Dozens of new foals were born these days out on the open range where Charlie and Helen often rode to see them. But Betsy and Sunlight still were kept near the ranch house.

Little was done at this time to teach the colt any of the things he would have to learn later. Of course with Betsy's example, complete confidence in mankind was established from the first. The lesson of halter breaking him, that is, training him to lead willingly and to stand quietly when tied was simple with Betsy's aid. So young a horse has but little strength and follows the pull of the rope without much resistance and no real fear. And simply to tie Sunlight to a post with halter and rope close to Betsy, who was also tied, soon taught him that it was useless to struggle to be free when once he was fastened.

That is something a horse never forgets nor does he seem to realize that, with his strength, increasing from colthood, he could easily break the halter or rope with which he is tied. It's fortunate for his master that such is the case, for generally it is impractical to carry halter and rope strong enough to hold a horse determined to break away.

And Charlie taught Sunlight to be gentle and quiet about having his feet lifted and held with a view to his future shoeing, for an unruly horse in the blacksmith's shop is a dangerous horse. Many an injury can result from a nail driven into a foot's tender tissue when a horse is restless. These simple things, once learned, are not forgotten—for horses have excellent memories.

Fine manners increase a horses' value and the pleasure of his ownership, not to mention the ease of caring for him. And the Crescent Ranch took great pride in the disposition and training of

the horses it turned out.

June was nearing its end. School for Charlie and Helen had already been closed for several weeks. One fine morning Mr. Stevens saddled Tim, his big bay horse.

"Want to come along, kids?" he asked.

"Sure thing," both replied, "but where?"

"Up Table Mountain. We'll have to get those mares off the river land if there's to be any feed left this winter."

"Charlie, get me the pliers, a hammer, and a couple of handfuls of staples. We may have to do some fence repairs."

Hank brought out a pair of saddlebags for his employer and fastened them behind the cantle. Soon Helen and Charlie were ready. The tools and staples were placed in the saddlebags and as the three riders passed the house Mrs. Stevens appeared with some lunch. That too went into the spacious pouches and the three riders were on their way.

Table Mountain, part of the National Forest, was a plateau of mostly unforested land about five miles from the Crescent Ranch. It was about three thousand feet higher, snow covered until early summer, for the temperature dropped well below freezing every night except in midsummer. Snow remained on the northern slopes sometimes throughout July and appeared again by September. Grass grew luxuriantly there and remained fresh and green when that in the valleys was parched and withered for lack of water. Clouds spilled their raindrops on the high plateau and left the lower lands dry. Therefore, little rivulets and small pools always provided drinking water for thirsty stock. Stockmen turned out horses and cattle there from July to September. The Forest Service controlled the grazing rights and each ranchman paid a certain sum per head to the Government. Sheep were kept off. To the north, east, and south, the sides of Table Mountain, which really is misnamed and should be called Plateau Pasture or Table Meadow, were too precipitous and steep for cattle or horses to attempt to travel. But on the west the land sloped gradually and a trail led from the valley of the Clearwater to the flat summit. The Forest Service had strung about three miles of fencing at the crest of this gradual slope so that stock, once through the gate and on Table Mountain, would have to stay there. The Service maintained the fencing but the forest rangers had much territory to cover and didn't always get things done just when needed. Mr. Stevens believed in "a stitch in time

saves nine" as an old adage has it, so he took with him the equipment needed for repairs.

The youngsters' hearts sank at the thought that perhaps Betsy and Sunlight would have to go along with the other mares and foals. They dreaded asking their father his intentions. But finally Helen gathered courage enough to ask the question.

"Yes, Sis," her father answered. "Sunlight will be safe enough up there. He'll be a much better colt when we bring him back in September than he would if he hung around here. Grass is getting pretty poor and the flies are bothering the horses a good deal. The breeze and the cool nights up there keep them down."

"Well, we can ride up to see Sunny whenever we wish," Charlie looked on the more cheerful side. "It isn't as if he were far away. He's too big now for a coyote to hurt and there are no wolves or mountain lions around here anymore."

"Maybe that wild streak will break out in Betsy again and she'll take Sunlight away and disappear," Helen said.

"We've lost no stock from Table Mountain yet. The horses like it up there and they just can't get down. I've ridden all around that big pasture and any horse or steer which tried would be pretty badly broken up. Sides are much too steep except where we fenced it.

"Cheer up, Helen. It will be for only a short time. Really only a few weeks," Mr. Stevens tried to console his daughter. "You and Charlie can help me drive the mares up and then you always can ride out to see Betsy and Sunny so they won't forget you."

"They wouldn't anyway," replied Helen.

10

Summer Pasture

Mr. Stevens and his two children had a good time on Table Mountain. The cool, breezy plateau was a welcome change from the warm, dry, valley. Before long Helen was almost glad that Sunny and Betsy were to spend the hottest summer weeks in such a good place. While Mr. Stevens was making a few repairs on the fencing, Helen and Charlie unsaddled their horses, letting them roll on the grass and graze to their hearts' content. Tim, too, was not forgotten and was given his chance for a rest. A keen appetite made lunch go down all too quickly and the time to start for home came before the boy and girl realized it.

Next morning Hank and Charlie and Jim Scudder rounded up the mares and foals and started them on their way up Table Mountain. The route led past the ranch house and there Mr. Stevens and Helen joined the party, bringing Betsy and Sunny. Jim Scudder stayed behind to attend to some cattle.

The mares seemed to know what was afoot. Many of them had been on Table Mountain previous summers. Led by a light dappled gray with a black colt at her side the fifteen mares followed in single file, which is the habit of range-bred horses. Mr. Stevens rode at the head while the three youngsters stayed near the rear of the line. No attempt was made to hurry the bunch. They just walked along, the foals frisking and scampering from one side to the other. It was a pretty sight.

After a couple of miles the trail grew steeper. The foals lost their youthful exuberance, staying quietly beside their dams. They would be tired young animals when they reached the flat summit of Table Mountain and for the first few nights they would feel really cold. But soon both mares and foals would become accustomed to the change from the warmer valley and enjoy the bountiful supply of grass and water and the almost complete freedom from torturing flies.

Betsy took her place in line quite as if she too had been with the bunch before, in other years, though this was the first trip. Sunny,

being older than the other colts, was still frisking and capering quite a while after the rest had settled down to the serious business of traveling. But he, too, finally felt like saving his energy to get him where he was going.

At last the fence was reached and Mr. Stevens opened the gate and let the mares and foals through it. Then the bunch was driven a half mile or so farther out into the pasture lands where they commenced grazing. After a little rest for their horses Mr. Stevens, Charlie, Hank, and Helen started homeward, the mares watching them depart but making no attempt to follow.

Betsy stayed with the other mares until a dip in the ground hid the riders from sight. Then neighing, she galloped after them, and by the time they were at the fence she had caught up with them. Of course Sunny was at her side. Betsy crowded right in among the four riders as if insisting that she be taken back with them to Crescent Ranch.

"Well! I didn't expect this!" Mr. Stevens wasn't any too well pleased. He did not want Helen to feel badly, knowing how fond she had become of Betsy and Sunny. But that girl had spunk. Turning her head a moment to hide the tears in her eyes, she took her rope from the saddle horn and threw it over Betsy's head.

"Here, Hank," she said, as holding Betsy she dismounted and handed Gopher's reins to the boy. "Take my horse through the gate. I'll keep Betsy here until Dad closes it."

Helen had her face in Betsy's mane stroking her neck.

"I hate to do this," she said. "But it's best for you. We'll be seeing each other often and I'll ask Dad to promise not to turn you out this winter. I'd like to have you for my own to ride."

Helen scrambled under the lowest strand of barbed wire after her brother had shut the gate.

"They'll be all right," her father said.

"I know that, Dad," the girl replied.

"Let's ride out to see them the day after tomorrow. We'll bring our lunch," Charlie proposed. He didn't like to leave Betsy and Sunny any more than Helen, but he tried to hide his feelings.

Helen and Charlie went out to Table Mountain as planned, taking their lunch and some lump sugar and slices of bread for Sunny and Betsy.

The two youngsters had quite a hunt to find the bunch of mares, for the plateau was extensive. But finally, after an hour's search,

they were located. In fact, it was really Sundance and Gopher who found them, for Helen and Charlie had been paying little attention to their horses for quite a time, their attention having been engaged by three elk cows and their spotted calves on a low hillside.

"Ranger Armstrong told Dad that last month there were elk up here. He said he had seen their tracks." Charlie remembered the conversation when the forest ranger had stopped for dinner and Mr. Stevens had made the arrangements to turn his horses out on Table Mountain.

"Dad said that he had not seen elk around here for twenty-five years and that he was glad they were returning to their old ranges," Charlie continued.

"Gee! It's great to see wild animals. I think I'd like to be a forest ranger when I grow up."

"You could have Sunlight to ride," Helen replied.

"Yes, wouldn't that be something! But much can happen before I'm old enough to be in the Forest Service, to both Sunny and me."

The children's conversation had been interrupted by Sundance's neigh, answering Betsy's. While their masters had been watching the elk, and talking, Gopher and Sundance had been moving along on the scent of the bunch of mares. Horses have a pretty keen sense of smell when living as they do in the West.

"There they are!" exclaimed Helen delightedly. "Come on, Gopher!"

The willing little Gopher broke into a gallop, Sundance racing beside him. The mares watched them for a moment then broke and ran, almost in a panic. All except Betsy. She and Sunny cantered to meet their friends.

Seeing the result of their speedy approach, Charlie and Helen immediately pulled down their horses to a slower gait.

"Oh! I forgot! Father's told us time and again not to gallop up to either a bunch of cattle or horses," Charlie said. "A little calf or foal could easily be hurt if we start a small stampede."

"Well, no harm is done this time." Helen was relieved when she saw the bunch stop after a minute or so and start toward them, following Betsy's example.

"Oh! Betsy, you good old thing." Helen had dismounted and with one arm around the mare's neck was feeding her sugar and bread, while Charlie was devoting himself to Sunlight, giving him his share of the tidbits.

"Good to see them again, eh, Sis?" said the boy.

"Let's see if you remember what I taught you, Sunny. Give me your foot."

Charlie lifted Sunlight's forefeet, first one and then the other. Then he repeated the performance with the hind ones.

"Perfect," he pronounced. "Now, how about leading?"

He took a piece of old fish line from his pocket and looped it around the colt's neck. It would not have held ten pounds weight, yet Sunlight responded to the slightest pull, just as if that light piece of line had been an unbreakable lariat.

"He has sense," said Helen. "Now let's find some water for Gopher and Sundance and have our lunch.

"It's just wonderful up here. Look at those mountains! Range after range, and snow still on the tops of at least half of them. And the grand clouds!"

"You're right, Sis." Charlie, too, felt the beauty of the mountains. "I'm glad I like it out here and that we don't live in a city where we couldn't have horses and see elk and deer and hear coyotes. Do you think we'd be allowed to camp up here for a night or two?"

"Guess Mother would think we weren't old enough," Helen answered.

By this time the two children had found water for their horses. About all one had to do on Table Mountain was to ride downhill. There was almost certain to be a spring or a little brook of crystal clear, cold water at the bottom, pure enough for a man to drink.

Betsy and Sunny stayed right close to the children all the time they remained, while the rest of the mares with their foals fed at a little distance. All too soon came the hour to leave for home. This time Betsy followed to the gate but did not try to go through. Perhaps she too liked it so well on Table Mountain that she had no wish to go back to Crescent Ranch, even if staying meant that she couldn't be with her friends.

Or perhaps she had something else in mind.

11

Where are Sunny and Betsy?

Charlie and Helen so enjoyed their day spent on Table Mountain that they let only three days go by before they again were there. This time they found the mares and foals easily, but as they rode towards the bunch no Betsy and Sunny came to meet them. The youngsters' hearts sank. Where could the mare and colt have gone? Maybe they were off by themselves somewhere and had not heard or seen the two riders.

"Don't worry, Helen. Betsy and Sunny are up here. I'm sure of that. We'll find them," Charlie assured his sister.

"Maybe a mountain lion got them," Helen answered. "Or perhaps they have been stolen."

"No mountain lions have been in these parts since Dad was a boy. Grandpa is supposed to have killed the last one. Remember his telling us about it?" Charlie refused to believe anything serious had happened to Sunny or Betsy. "And they can't be stolen because no one has opened the gate since I closed it. I fastened it in a special way just so I could tell if anyone had come through."

"Yes, but maybe the thief cut the wire at some other place." Helen refused to stop worrying.

"That could be," Charlie conceded. By this time he, too, was alarmed. "Well, let's start to hunt for them."

And hunt they did, first all along the three miles of fencing. No sign that the wire had been tampered with could they see.

"That knocks out the rustler idea," Helen said. "Besides all the other mares and foals are here. It's not likely a rustler would stop at just one mare and colt when he could have the others, too, even though Sunny and Betsy were the best of the bunch."

"Well, just keep on looking," Charlie answered glancing anxiously in all directions. He dreaded what he might possibly see, two torn, bloody carcasses which once were a beautiful mare and her fine colt. He felt certain that there were no mountain lions or cougars anywhere near Crescent Ranch. Still one never could tell. Perhaps a stray, solitary cougar could have traveled from

Yellowstone Park where a few still remained. Elk had appeared again after they had all been shot out. To be sure, elk were protected, whereas every man's hand was against the lions. But then, mountain lions were so much more cunning than elk, so stealthy, so nocturnal in their habits, that unless one found some animal they had killed he might never suspect that they were around.

"I'll keep a sharp lookout for cougar tracks," Charlie said to himself.

He wasn't afraid for Helen or himself. The instances when a mountain lion has attacked a human being are so rare, even in early days when they were more plentiful and firearms less effective, that the danger from one was simply nonexistent, especially in daylight. But horse flesh, particularly of foals, was a favorite meal for mountain lions. And here were many foals to be had for the killing. Still neither Gopher or Sundance showed nervousness; and the mares seemed quite unafraid, grazing quietly, not the least bit on the alert as if a dangerous foe might lurk behind some rock or tree.

Sunset was only a short time away. Sundance and Gopher were two tired horses when finally Helen said, "We simply must go. Mother is worrying right now and we ought to be through the forest while there's still some light."

Reluctantly her brother agreed. "We couldn't see much in the dark anyway. But I'm coming back tomorrow. Everybody from the ranch is coming back. I'll make them."

Charlie was desperate. Betsy and Sunny must be somewhere on Table Mountain. The boy felt that he had proven that they had not been stolen, since his special way of fastening had been undisturbed and the wire had not been cut. He had almost dismissed the mountain lion idea, though he still wasn't certain about that.

Perhaps Betsy or Sunny had broken a leg somewhere on Table Mountain and were suffering.

Yes. Everybody from Crescent Ranch would search tomorrow. They would leave not an acre of the big plateau uncovered.

Daylight had gone when the brother and sister emerged from the pine forest to the sagebrush-covered lowlands. The sound of the hoofbeats of galloping horses came to their ears. Their father and mother rode out of the dusk.

"Where have you been? Are you all right?" Mrs. Stevens asked anxiously.

“Sunny and Betsy are gone!” Charlie managed to say, for he, too, was brokenhearted and dead tired.

“We hunted for them as long as we could. Not a trace anywhere.”

“We’ll go back tomorrow,” the ranchman decided. “All hands.”

“I knew you’d do that, Dad,” Charlie replied.

“Children! You never ate your lunch,” exclaimed Mrs. Stevens noticing Charlie’s bulging saddlebags.

“Oh, Mother! We forgot all about it,” Helen answered.

12

Misfortune

Early next morning everyone from Crescent Ranch was in the saddle. Hank rode the White-Faced Black again. “Another stray hunting job for you, you ornery old bronc,” the boy had said as he saddled.

The White-Faced Black had given Hank no more trouble and now he really began to like the horse. Faithful little Gopher, the smallest horse at the ranch, seemed so tired and stiff that Helen was on Calico, Hank’s horse. Sundance seemed quite rested and able to go through another hard day. All day long the Crescent Ranch folks hunted, divided into two groups, one with Mr. Stevens and the other with Jim Scudder. Three cowhands were along and a visitor, a guest of the Stevens’. Not a sign or trace of Sunny and Betsy could they find, though the search continued until almost dusk and horses and riders were ready to drop with fatigue.

“It’s beyond me, boss,” Jim Scudder declared. “That mare and colt just aren’t up here. And I think they weren’t stolen. Our trail is the only one up here. I looked carefully for colts’ tracks going down. There were none.”

“I can’t account for it,” Mr. Stevens rejoined. “Horses can’t fly. But I’m convinced that there is no use of looking again. We did a thorough job.”

“Did you see any lion tracks, any sign of a kill? Deer, or anything?” This is in a low tone so the others would not hear.

“No. Lions are out. None are on Table Mountain,” Jim replied.

“It’s certainly a mystery,” said Mr. Stevens.

Meanwhile, what had become of Sunny and his dam?

On the day after Helen and Charlie had for the first time ridden up to Table Mountain to see the mare and colt, Betsy had been restless and uneasy. She had not stayed with the others but had kept near the gate as if waiting for the youngsters to come again. Sunny, of course, had remained with her, though he missed his frolics with the other foals. All of one day Betsy watched, then at nightfall

rejoined the band. Some instinct prompted her to do this, a feeling that if danger threatened greater safety lay in numbers. On the second day, after a couple of hours spent within sight of the gate, Betsy began exploring the boundaries of the tableland. Along the fence she wandered, searching for a place where strands of wire rusted through might have snapped, or where a rotting post lay on the ground. But that fence was fairly new and kept in good repair, as were all things with which Mr. Stevens had anything to do.

Soon Betsy saw that the fence offered no chance of escape. Too well she had learned that barbed wire can hurt cruelly. And she never dreamed that she could jump it, though a deer would have cleared the three strands easily, and a horse in the fox hunting field would have jumped a three rail fence, just as high, as a matter of course. It's simply that the western horse is no jumper, not of wire at any rate. Then Betsy began an examination of the cliff wall which surrounded the flat top of Table Mountain on the east, north, and south, trying at one place after another to find a trail leading down. Sunlight followed his mother, little knowing the reason for her unaccustomed restlessness.

For one whole day the mare searched and searched. Then near the close of the second day she found what she was looking for, a cliff over which she and Sunny might descend. To be sure, it was not a way that a sensible horse would select, nor one that any rider would ask his mount to try. But it was a possible way, and Betsy so longed to return to Crescent Ranch that she was ready to take the risk of a bad fall, even of Sunlight's being hurt. And this is unusual in any horse. But then Betsy came of an unusual strain of horses.

The cliff down which Betsy decided to go was quite smoothed and steep, at an angle of perhaps twenty-five or thirty degrees from the vertical. Beginning about eight feet from its top a ledge slanted across the cliff's face, affording foothold for a horse once that topmost eight feet were successfully passed. And the steepness led to the base of the cliff. It would have been a perfect highway for bighorn sheep, the white or Rocky Mountain goat, and deer or elk would have traveled that ledge without difficulty, their sharp-toed cloven hooves affording foothold where the round hoof of the horse would slip. In fact, the mare could see that a game trail led away from the lower end of that ledge out into the lodgepole pine forest. It was not a well-defined trail, but it was there; and Betsy knew once Sunny and she were over the cliff the rest would be fairly easy.

There's a saying in the mountains that a horse can go anywhere a man can go without using his hands.

Betsy started. Gathering her feet under her she carefully picked her way over the top edge of the cliff, aiming to stop on the ledge eight feet below. Of course she was unshod. With her hind legs folded so that the mare almost sat on her haunches, she slid down and checked herself on the ledge.

The most dangerous part of the feat was over. Moving downward a couple of lengths so as to be out of Sunlight's way, Betsy whinnied softly to him to come after her. The brave colt understood. Carefully following his mother's example, he reached the ledge safely. He realized the danger that to fall from the height where he stood meant death. Waiting a little while for Sunlight to gain some confidence, Betsy gingerly worked down the ledge just a few feet at a time. It was steep but not very difficult. At one place a pine sapling about two inches in diameter grew from a crevice in the ledge, effectively blocking the mare's way. For a few minutes Betsy felt panicky. To turn around was impossible. The ledge was too narrow; besides, Sunlight was close behind her.

But Betsy was intelligent and resourceful. A few nips of her strong teeth cut through the trunk of the sapling. That trouble was ended. Sunlight and Betsy continued their slow descent.

Now they were within twenty-five feet of the cliff's base. And here another obstacle confronted them. The ledge became too narrow to give foothold to a horse. And here too the face of the cliff was nearly perpendicular, much too steep for a horse to attempt to slide down. That would mean a very dangerous fall on broken rock. Yet, barely three yards beyond, the ledge widened again to be more than broad enough for a horse's footing.

Only one thing was there to do—to jump the gap! Betsy knew that she could make it. A nine foot leap, even from a standing start was easy for her, agile, well-muscled as she was. But for young Sunny, still a gangling, awkward colt, despite his fine development, it might prove impossible.

Jump she must! Gathering herself, Betsy leaped and landed easily. Now could Sunlight follow? What a test for a young colt! A jump three times his length from a standing start on a rocky ledge! And he could not fail!

Sunlight edged along until the ledge scarcely gave him room for even his smaller hooves. Of course that diminished the distance of

his jump. But also it made his footing less secure.

Betsy looked back anxiously. And her soft, low neigh urged him to try.

Gamely, Sunlight jumped, putting all his strength into the attempt. He fell short by hardly an inch. Down along the cliff he fell. He landed in a heap at the base!

Forgetting her own safety, Betsy descended the remaining part of the ledge almost at a gallop. Sunlight lay where he had fallen. His mother's soft muzzle touched him. She breathed on him.

The colt raised his head. He was alive!

Was he hurt, badly hurt?

There were ugly scratches and blood on his sides and legs. But were bones broken? Betsy urged Sunny to rise. Twice the plucky colt lifted himself on his forelegs, then sank down. One hind leg hurt so much! At the third trial he made it with Betsy's muzzle against his side to help him to his feet.

Sunlight stood shaking in pain on three legs. His right hind leg was useless, and hurt so badly.

Betsy, too, seemed helpless. A mother mountain lion or bear, wolf of coyote, would lick an injured kitten or cub. The warmth and massage would have healing quality. And a broken bone with them would quickly knit. But a bone fracture with a colt must heal perfectly so that when he grows up he will be sound and useful. Bear or mountain lion, even wolf or coyote, might limp through life, if he didn't limp too badly, and survive for years.

Perhaps none of Sunlight's bones were broken. Maybe his hind leg was only severely bruised or strained.

How Betsy wanted her master's help! Many long, rough miles lay between the spot where Sunlight stood crippled and Crescent Ranch. Of course the mare knew the way home even though she was north on the farthest side of Table Mountain. Horses have a marvelous homing instinct. But could Sunlight travel? Certainly not for the present. And all that Betsy could do was to offer him his customary warm meal. Sunlight nursed, though he was in pain and sore all over. But his mother's warm milk brought him comfort and strength. His trembling ceased.

It was a bad place, where mare and foal were. The sloping ground was strewn with broken rock, through which pine trees grew, shading the earth and covering it with their needles. No grass sprouted thereabouts, nor leafy sapling on which Betsy mighty

browse. And little sunshine penetrated the pine foliage. Certainly Betsy must somehow get her colt to a better kind of country. He would be nourished by her rich milk, but she must find food and water for herself if she was to feed her foal.

13

Escape

For the entire day when Sunlight met with his accident, his mother never left his side. Fortunately where he had fallen there was just room enough for him to lie down in a little pocket of pine needles between the stones. But Betsy had to remain standing, and she stood all through the night, drowsing on her feet. In the morning she knew she must go in search of grass and water, so after her colt had nursed she started. Sunlight had been able to regain his feet, though with some difficulty. When he saw his mother leaving, he gamely followed, hobbling on three legs, holding his injured right hind foot clear of the ground, apparently quite able to control it, though not without pain. That was a good sign, an almost certain sign that no bones were broken and that his hurts probably consisted of muscular bruises or sprains. And these would heal completely, given a little time. Sunlight would be as sound again as if he had never had a fall.

Perhaps Betsy instinctively realized this, for she gave a low neigh as Sunlight limped after her. The going was not easy, though Betsy followed the game trail made by the woodland animals. But a horse is not a woodland animal. His natural home is on the plains or rolling prairies where keen eyesight can discern an enemy in time for his speed to save him, where grass will furnish feed, and firm ground afford good footing for his round, hard hooves. But Sunlight made progress slowly. After an hour's travel, the trees began to grow thinner and grass appeared here and there. Betsy stopped to graze while Sunny rested, nibbling a bit, too. But the grass was dry and she was thirsty, so the mare did not wait long before moving on again.

Sunlight was ready to follow once more when the mare began traveling, gamely trailing his mother. Soon Betsy heard the sound of tumbling waters. The white water of a cascade shone through the tree trunks.

Leaving Sunlight behind for a moment, Betsy cantered to the stream's edge, wading knee deep in the cold current. Never had

water tasted so good. Now the matter of food and drink was settled. Here would she stay until Sunlight was sound again and able to travel without limping. That she was on privately-owned property, surrounded by barbed wire was something that she did not realize, though before long she was to find that out. Sunlight and Betsy were in a beautiful grove of Douglas pines, great, towering trees with trunks five or six feet in diameter. They comprised a so-called "park," a combination of trees and grass often found in the forested parts of the Rockies.

For a week the mare and colt remained before Betsy started for Crescent Ranch. All the surroundings were perfectly suited to Sunny's recovery. Grass was luxuriant, the water clear and cool, while shade from the hot sun was abundant. It was little wonder that Sunlight's limp had nearly disappeared and his cuts and bruises almost healed at the end of a week.

Betsy knew the way to her home ranch, though she had never been in this region before. The trip to it from Table Mountain necessitated a long, circuitous route, perhaps two or three days' travel. Sunlight couldn't go far at a time, even though Betsy herself could make seventy or eighty miles in a day when necessary.

The mare and colt had not gone far towards Crescent Ranch before they encountered wire fencing. Baffled, Betsy walked along the fence, only to find that she was in a huge enclosed field. That was the reason for the wonderful pasturage, since no stock could get in to eat it. And then Betsy heard voices. Going in their direction she found a tent pitched under the pines beside the stream. Apparently there was a way through the fence, for a car was beside the tent.

A man was fly casting for trout in the clear water, while his wife was preparing a meal over a small fire.

"Here are visitors!" the woman called as Betsy and Sunny approached.

Accustomed all her life to nothing but kindness from people, the mare had gone up to the camp without the least hesitation.

The fisherman waded ashore.

"She's a beauty all right," he said. "And she has a fine colt, though she seems to have had some hard luck. They're well-bred horses, that's evident. Not just range stock. Branded with a Crescent. That's not the Collins' brand."

Judge Collins owned the land on which the fisherman and his wife were camped. They were friends of his and expected that the

judge would visit them for a trout dinner in a day or two.

"The judge will know about the mare and colt when he comes. Meanwhile we'll see that she doesn't get out," the angler continued.

"Isn't she a friendly sort?" his wife replied. "I'd love to have her back east."

Betsy was glad to have human company since it seemed that she would have to stay within the confines of the barbed wire fence. Of course she knew there was a gate somewhere, but gates are designed so that horses can't open them, and it never occurred to the mare that she might find it and set herself free.

At last Betsy's chance to escape came. Mr. Johnston, that was the fisherman's name, wanted to try a different stream. So he and his wife drove out to the gate, intending to go through. The usual gate in a barbed wire fence is not of the hinged sort. To open it is something of a task, involving the unwinding of wire fastening and the swinging back of wire strands out of the way. Being an easterner, Mr. Johnston opened the gate, left it open while he got back into the car, drove it through, and then went back to close the gate.

Sunlight and Betsy were grazing near the gate. Up went the mare's head as the angler unfastened it. She was in a dead run as he drove the car through, with Sunny making the best time he could right at her heels.

Aghast at the idea of letting out the mare and colt, Mr. Johnston rushed to close the gate.

But he was too late! Mare and colt were through it in a flash.

Down the trail Sunny and Betsy galloped, the colt now almost without a sign of a limp.

Now, if the Johnstons had been Westerners, Mrs. Johnston would have stood at the gate while her husband drove the car through, knowing that it's not unusual for horses to try to get out, and that she could have prevented the escape.

"We'd better get word to the judge and tell him that we let those two horses get away," Mrs. Johnston advised.

"Let's telephone from the Ranger station," Mr. Johnston said.

"I've no mare up there," Judge Collins answered over the telephone. "Oh! A crescent brand. That's Stevens' mark. I'll call him and tell him. Can't imagine how she got there. Stevens isn't the man to turn

a horse out into another man's pasture without telling him, even though he knows he's welcome to whatever little grass one mare and colt will eat. Besides, she's twenty-five miles from home, the way she would have to travel. Which way did that mare go?"

"East," was Johnston's answer.

"Well, she's headed for home," said Judge Collins as he hung up the receiver.

14

Home Again

True to his word, Judge Collins telephoned Crescent Ranch. But it so happened that all the Stevens family were away on a day's trip when he called, and since the judge himself went out to visit the Johnston's camp, the news of Betsy's and Sunny's escape never reached the home ranch.

Betsy and her colt started for Crescent Ranch, the mare guided by that unerring, marvelous instinct so well developed in many animals. They missed the fresh grass of Table Mountain but fared well enough on what feed they could find as they traveled.

There was little wire fencing in the section traversed by Betsy and her colt. She and Sunlight made steady progress towards home, following mostly unfrequented dirt roads. Sunny still limped at times, particularly in the morning before he had a chance to "limber up." His scratches and cuts were almost healed now, though no hair as yet had begun to cover them. Water was hard to find, for the ranchmen had fenced off most of the water holes and springs and as yet the two travelers had not come to the Clearwater. But they found one place where a little stream fed by a mountain shower was flowing under a crude wooden bridge across the road.

It was the custom in pleasant weather for the Stevens family to have breakfast on a paved terrace just outside their dining room. They breakfasted early as all ranch folks must, and to watch the sun illuminate the peaks as it rose clear of them, was a never ending source of delight to Mrs. Stevens, who had taught Charlie and Helen also to find joy in all the varied phases of the outdoors. Their father said but little about his fondness for the open, but scarcely ever a bird or small creature appeared without his noting it, and many a time he would stop his horse as he rode the range and seemingly breathe in the wonder of the country spread out before him.

Charlie and Helen and their father and mother, too, had never ceased to grieve for Sunny and Betsy, and to wonder what had happened to them. The youngsters had wanted to go up again and

search on Table Mountain, but their father had vetoed the plan.

"It would be useless," he had said. "We left no spot uncovered. Betsy and Sunny are not there. Remember, sometimes we could see a mile or more in every direction and both Jim Scudder and I had our field glasses. And we hunted through every bit of timber there was. Not a chance that our two favorites are on Table Mountain." But he added to himself, "Not alone anyway."

That had settled it and with Sunny and Betsy gone, Helen and Charlie had no desire to make the trip to the high pasture, interesting and magnificent as it was.

One beautiful morning the Stevens were having breakfast on the terrace as usual. The two children were thinking sadly of their lost mare and colt. Suddenly, from around the corner of the ranch house, Sunlight and Betsy appeared. Betsy gave her customary low whinny and went directly to Mrs. Stevens, asking for bread as of old.

Utterly astonished, dumbfounded, the Stevens were speechless for the moment, and then the family found their voices.

"Where have you been, old girl?" from Mrs. Stevens.

"Oh, I'm so glad you're back!" exclaimed Helen, her arms around Betsy's neck.

"Dad! Sunny's been hurt! His hide's all scarred!" Charlie had given his attention to Sunlight, while his mother and sister were making a fuss over Betsy.

Instantly the ranchman was beside the colt.

"He's had a bad time, all right. But no animal has been at him. There are no tooth or claw marks. Looks almost as if he had been dragged."

Then Mr. Stevens noticed that Sunny was favoring his right hind leg, that he would not willingly bear his weight on it. Quickly the ranchman examined fetlock and pastern, hock and stifle joint, and lastly the hip bones. A look of relief spread over his features.

"Bones okay," he announced. "But he was terribly bruised. Can't imagine what happened. If he'd been dragged, his shoulders, too, would have been scratched."

"Well, they're back anyway," said Helen. "May they stay now, Dad?"

"Yes, Sis, I guess we'll keep 'em," her father assented. "I was really worried."

15

A Birthday Present

"I guess Betsy has lost her desire for freedom," Mrs. Stevens remarked a few days later. "She would never have come home like this. She wouldn't have left Table Mountain if the old home ranch hadn't looked pretty good to her."

Mr. and Mrs. Stevens were waiting for their horses to be brought to them. They were going for a ride. Just then Hank appeared leading Whirlwind and Mr. Stevens' big bay. At the sound of her mistress' voice Betsy raised her head. She had been grazing out of sight a short distance away. She trotted toward Mrs. Stevens. Sunny was at her side. The ranchman's eyes lit with admiration and fondness at the sight of mare and foal.

"Best mare I've ever owned. Let's see. She's eight years old. She should give us a lot of foals still. That wild streak wouldn't get a chance to show itself if we sold them any place where there was no open range. There's no viciousness in her blood. And she raises a fine colt. Look how Sunlight has grown. He's valuable right now, when those little scamps out on the range couldn't be sold for anything but their hides."

A shadow of disappointment crossed Mrs. Stevens' face. She said nothing for a few moments. Her husband looked at her, wondering why she was so silent.

"What's wrong, dear?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing. You're right. Betsy makes a fine broodmare. Much the best on the ranch."

"Yes. But you have something on your mind," Mr. Stevens persisted. "Out with it."

But still Mrs. Stevens hesitated. Well she knew the value of such good stock as Betsy.

"Tell me what you are thinking about, honey," the ranchman urged.

"Well, Walter, it's just this. Helen simply loves Betsy dearly. You've just about promised Sunlight to Charlie when he's old enough to be ridden. Helen hasn't said much but I know her heart is

set on having Betsy for her own. Betsy won't have a colt next spring and I know Helen is counting on riding her as soon as Sunny doesn't need her anymore. That, of course, will be this fall. Good little Gopher looks pretty small when that long-legged girl gets on him. If she grows just a little taller, we'll be putting roller skates on the stirrups so they won't drag on the ground."

Mr. Stevens laughed.

"Helen's birthday is November seventh," Mrs. Stevens went on. "I had planned to buy her a new saddle. Charlie has been saving for a whole year so he could give her a new bridle, and I think it would be wonderful if you gave her a new horse. I know she would want to keep Gopher. She would hate to have you sell him."

"Oh, I wouldn't do that," Helen's father quickly replied. "I remember how I felt about my own little Indian pony. Rat, we called him. And he stayed around the ranch long after he was no longer rideable. Too long, maybe. Anyway, a gentle horse like Gopher would always be of use, even though he is small. He's tough and can carry a lot of weight. And he's not so slow, either."

Summer passed. Autumn came. Sunny grew to be a family pet. Betsy got a regular feed of oats each day which her colt soon learned to share. He could have shifted for himself well enough by now but Mr. Stevens believed in letting his foals run with their dams just as long as the mares would let them nurse.

"Gives the little fellows a good start for the winter," the ranchman had claimed. For, you see, both mares and foals stay outdoors all the year through. They thrive in spite of that.

Then came Helen's birthday. The Stevens family came down to breakfast as if nothing extraordinary were in the air. Luckily it was Saturday, so there was no school. No one congratulated Helen. It seemed as if father, mother, and brother had all forgotten about her birthday. The meal was nearly ended. At first the girl had been all expectancy. Then the thought crossed her mind, "Have they forgotten about me? I'm fourteen today."

And still there was no word or glance from her family. Each of them went on eating quite as usual. Disappointment showed itself in Helen's face. Tears were not so far off, though she strove to hold them back.

Then when it seemed that Helen could stand it no longer there

came a tap on the window-pane. Hank was there, his freckled face all agrin. But why was he so high, as if he might be sitting on the window sill? The boy motioned to Helen to open the window. Quickly the girl complied. Hank gave her an envelope. It looked like a telegram, at least the envelope was the kind in which telegrams are sent. Of course, Helen saw that Hank was on a horse. But he had taken care that she had not had a good look at the horse.

Then she opened the envelope. It contained just a sheet of letter paper. But it read: "*Happy Birthday to Helen from Betsy. I give you me!*"

In a flash Helen was out of the house. Hank had left Betsy by the door and had hidden himself.

Then Helen saw the new saddle, the new bridle. On the former was fastened a little note, "From Mother," on the latter, "From Charlie," and tied to Betsy's mane was a third little card, "From Dad."

Helen gathered up the reins and swung into the saddle. What if she wasn't in riding clothes! Betsy started off on a canter. Now there was the quick beat of hooves, a little whinny, and then came Sunny, galloping beside Betsy. Hank had turned him out and he had run straight for his mother. He intended to stay in the picture.

Now Helen was back, thanking everybody. Her delight knew no bounds.

"Is she all right to ride, Dad?" she asked, thinking of Sunlight.

"Yes," her father replied. "Sunlight doesn't really need her now. He'll make a fuss for a while. He and Betsy can be together most of the time. I won't turn him out this winter with the others. He's too good to risk losing."

"Gee, Sis! Won't we look like something riding them together?" Charlie said. And then his face fell. "Two and a half years! That's a long time to wait before he's old enough. Well, I still have Sundance."

16

Turned Out for the Summer

School takes most of the daylight hours in the winter, particularly when the schoolhouse is almost ten miles away and one has to depend on the school bus. Except for weekends and holidays Helen had but little time to enjoy her birthday gift. Sunny and Betsy with Gopher and Sundance, and the other horses kept at the ranch for winter use, spent most of their time turned out in the cow pasture with hay to munch and a small measure of oats each day. The other foals and their dams out on the range had to paw and nose away the snow to reach their forage—the dried grass. Mr. Stevens had kept his stock from certain fields during late summer so that the grass might grow for winter feed. If he saw that his horses were not wintering well he intended to haul hay to them, for he believed in giving his horses every possible care. But every day that his stock could find feed for themselves meant that much money saved for the Crescent Ranch. He was too fond of his horses to see them suffer, however, and many a time he took hay to them when less considerate ranchmen might have let the mares become so thin and weak that their foals in the spring would have been poor and scrubby, hardly worth raising.

There was not much that Charlie and Helen could do with Sunny during the first winter. Of course, constant association with the kind ranch family gave him every confidence in mankind.

"Shucks!" Hank said. "It won't be any fun breaking that colt. He won't know any better than to do as he's expected to do."

Hank rather enjoyed a tussle with a bronco, but like all inherently good horsemen, he had no use for a vicious horse nor one that couldn't be gentled, given time and patience enough. He had come to use the White-Faced Black in preference to the sedate and rather uninteresting Calico. Under Hank's handling that animal seemed to have forgotten how to buck.

Finally, spring came with its longer days giving time for riding for an hour or so after school. Helen found Betsy a never ending source of joy. The mare was so responsive, so smooth-gaited, so

willing and gentle. She was fast, so much faster than Sundance or the White-Faced Black that there was no use in racing with those two horses.

"Sis, you just wait two years," Charlie said. "Then I'll show you a horse that can run. Maybe he'll even beat Betsy."

"Betsy will be ten years old then," Helen replied rather ruefully. "She won't have to race if she doesn't want to."

"Oh, she'll be all right at ten," Hank reassured the girl. "With the care that mare has had she'll be good at twenty."

Then came a day in early summer when Mr. Stevens announced that Sunlight would have to go out with the other yearlings. Charlie and Helen protested.

"Suppose something should happen to him," they said. "Remember last summer how he was hurt? Badly hurt?"

"We'll have to take that chance, kids," the ranchman answered. "Sunlight just can't stay around the ranch all summer. It's Table Mountain for him along with the mares and foals, and the other yearlings. I wish I'd sent the yearlings up there last summer instead of to that timber tract. I'll bet they would be better for it now. The feed up there is the best in these parts."

Helen and Charlie had no answer. They knew their father meant what he said and that for the summer at least they would have to be content with visiting Sunny every few days.

But then another thought came to the boy and girl.

"Suppose Sunny comes home again as he did last year?" Helen said. "What will we do then?"

"Put him behind a tight fence," her father replied. "Sorry, kids. But I'll promise to keep your pet at the ranch next winter and if Charlie doesn't get too heavy he can ride Sunny a little the following summer. Not far, fast, nor for a long time. Just a little."

"I'd go on a diet for that," Charlie smilingly agreed.

"I guess that won't be necessary. You're still a featherweight." The ranchman put his hand affectionately on his son's head. "It took me quite a while to grow, too, Son."

"Well, you're full sized now," said Charlie, admiring his father's fine physique.

Mr. Stevens was a splendid specimen of manhood. Just under six feet in height, straight, well-proportioned, broad of shoulder, his one hundred and ninety pounds were without an ounce of surplus weight. It took a big horse to carry him.

“We’ll take the horses up to Table Mountain tomorrow,” Mr. Stevens announced one June day after school had closed. “Know anybody who would like to come along?”

“We do!” exclaimed Charlie and Helen in unison.

“And I guess I’ll come, too,” their mother said.

So once more the mares and foals and now the yearlings climbed up to the high pasture.

Sunny stayed with the riders all the way up. He remained close to them while they ate their lunch and started to follow them home. But Charlie stopped him at the gate.

“You’ll be all right up here as soon as you get used to it,” he said, fastening the wire again. “You will have a lot of good company.”

“And we’ll be up to see you often,” Helen added.

17

On His Own

Sunlight waited for hours at the trail gate leading from Table Mountain, hoping that the folks from the ranch would reappear. The other yearlings and the mares and foals grazed over the plateau, keeping in separate bands but still close to each other. At last Sunny joined them. He missed Betsy a little. But a yearling is quite able to be on his own. If his dam should have a little foal beside her, the yearling is likely to be driven away.

Sunlight, as a yearling, may have remembered something of his stay on Table Mountain the previous summer. He took to the life up there quickly enough now, enjoying the fresh green grass, the coolness and comparative freedom from flies. Soon he joined the dozen other yearlings. He was somewhat better developed than most of them, due to better feeding and shelter during the winter, and also because he was a little older. The yearlings kept a little apart from the mares and foals, though they were never far from them.

Things went along finely. Charlie and Helen rode up to see Sunny on the fourth day after he was turned out on Table Mountain. The two children returned to Crescent Ranch well satisfied that the colt would fare very well for the summer.

But on the day after the visit, Bert Weston, a guide and rancher living not far from the Stevens, drove half a dozen pack horses and one much smaller horse to Table Mountain. The sturdy pack horses were sensible, gentle animals and joined quietly with the Stevens' stock. But the little horse was a wiry, nervous animal. He measured about thirteen hands at the withers, really only a big pony.[*]

He was mischievous rather than vicious and had a habit of nipping the pack horses or even threatening to kick them occasionally. The larger horses paid scant attention to the little rascal. Apparently they were accustomed to him and considered him harmless. Once in a while they might aim a half-hearted kick at the pony by way of warning; and, if he came too close, they might reach out their heads and snap their teeth at him just to teach him

to keep his distance.

Now this pony's name was Scamp. He really wasn't a bad sort, being gentle enough under the saddle for a child to ride. But turned out with other horses he could be bothersome. He knew enough to leave the mares alone. They would stand for no interference with their little foals. But the yearlings were another story. Now the mares felt no responsibility as far as they were concerned, even though most of those yearlings had been running at their dam's sides the previous summer.

Scamp studied the yearlings for a while. He saw a chance for some fun; that is, fun from his viewpoint. He trotted toward a yearling filly. She watched him come without much concern. Now he was beside her. Scamp switched his tail and let fly with his heels, giving the plump filly a resounding thwack in her ribs. Since the pony wore no shoes, the kick likely did not hurt her a great deal. But she didn't like it and cantered away. Then Scamp rushed at Sunny, head extended, teeth bared. He nipped him on his shoulder. Sunlight wheeled and he, too, loped away, then turned back, and took refuge among the mares. Now the pony was nipping and kicking at any yearling he could. Soon he had all of them panicky, and afraid to graze. He'd found a new way to tease.

The mares looked on indifferently. Any one of them could have settled the troublesome little horse. But now the yearlings must look out for themselves. And the pack horses seemed almost glad that the pest had found an outlet for his peskiness! They had no reason to interfere.

This state of things went on day after day. At any time Scamp might stop feeding and start picking on the yearlings. He never really hurt them—there were no marks of hoof or tooth on their hides. Charlie and Helen rode out every few days to see Sunny and on those occasions the pony stayed quietly among the pack horses. He had brains enough to know that the Stevens youngsters would stand for none of his kind of funny work. While they were around, the yearlings grazed without fear, sensing that Helen and Charlie were protection.

"It seems to me those yearlings are awfully hungry," Helen said. "Even Sunny seems more interested in grass than in us."

"That's right, Sis. Well, maybe after last night's shower the grass tastes particularly good," Charlie agreed. But other than that, neither boy or girl saw anything unusual. Had Scamp's nips drawn

blood or his kicks broken the skin or lamed the yearlings, they might have suspected trouble. The pony never really attacked the yearlings to hurt them. As we said before, he was mischievous rather than vicious.

After a few weeks, however, the constant anxiety and the teasing began to tell on the yearlings. They lost weight. Ribs began to show. And an expression of fear came into their eyes.

"Maybe I imagine it," Charlie remarked, "but it looks to me as if Sunny isn't in as good shape as he was. And the rest aren't so sleek either."

"Yet they are always eating and there's plenty of grass," Helen answered.

Hank was with them on this occasion. "You don't imagine it, Charlie," he said. "There's something strange going on. But I haven't the least idea what it can be. The mares and the foals are in wonderful condition. And look at those old pack horses! Just rolling in fat. I can't make it out."

"We'll have to tell Dad about it," Helen replied.

But Mr. Stevens didn't take the youngsters very seriously when they explained about the yearlings.

"Son," he said, "you're just impatient for your colt to grow up. If the mares are thriving, the yearlings must be doing well enough."

"Come up and see for yourself, Dad," Helen urged.

"All right, I'll do that, Sis," her father agreed. "Just as soon as I can take a day off. We are short-handed, you know."

One might have thought that Scamp would tire of worrying the yearlings. He had done it so often. But it seemed that this was the chance he had waited for all his life. Always before there had been some human to interfere when he wanted to have a little fun, or the other horses were just too big to be safe to bother too much.

These yearlings were just right, about his own size and apparently without sense enough to fight back. And there were so many of them. It was such fun to send them dodging in among the mares and foals. Scamp seldom ventured to go after them then, having too much respect for the mares' heels.

One day it seemed that the pony was particularly bothersome. And this time he picked on Sunny more than on the others. He managed to cut him away from the bunch. Each time the yearling tried to rejoin it, Scamp headed him off. Finally Sunny stood his ground. He wheeled and kicked at Scamp. The pony stopped

surprised.

Now he turned on Sunlight, mischief in his eyes. His ears were pointed forward, not backward like those of an ugly horse. He nipped at the colt, and squealing, struck with his forefeet. One hoof struck Sunlight's shoulder. It was not a hard blow, for a horse has much less power in his forefeet than in his hind ones. But it angered Sunny. He turned, ears laid back, and went for Scamp. The colt was angry now, too. He cantered away, and as Sunny galloped near enough, up went his heels. The colt received another sharp kick, this time on his chest. Sunny reared and struck with his forefeet. But Scamp had dodged. The pony was having a fine time. But Sunny was in earnest.

Now he went for Scamp, driving straight at him with outstretched head. His teeth raked the pony's neck. The thick mane saved Scamp from real harm. Sunny was too close for the pony to kick effectively. He had broken through Scamp's guard.

Now the pony and the colt faced each other, rearing, striking with their forefeet, trying to bite each other. Down on all fours again, they kicked and slammed, giving and receiving thudding blows.

Sunlight was learning how to fight. His longer legs gave him an advantage. His small hooves were reaching Scamp when the latter's shorter kick failed to strike home. Soon the pony had enough. He turned and galloped away. Sunny pursued him. Now the tables were turned.

Sunlight did not chase Scamp far. He, too, was willing to call quits. After all, he only wanted to be left alone.

While the scrap had been going on the yearlings had gathered around to watch. Sunny rejoined them. In some way which we humans cannot understand, they now accorded him leadership.

Scamp kept at a distance for the rest of that day. But on the next, he mingled with the herd again. Now he decided to leave the yearlings alone. Peace once more existed for them on Table Mountain.

"There's something different about the yearlings today," Charlie said on the next visit he and Helen paid Sunny.

"They are like they used to be. They have time to notice us. And Sunny sticks around."

"Yes," Helen agreed. "I'd say they seemed relaxed. But that's a silly word to apply to a horse."

“Well, anyway, they seem just natural.”

And no one ever knew how Sunlight, quite on his own, met the first small crisis in his life.

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[*] A hand is equal to four inches and is a horseman’s way of designating the height of a horse.

18

The Training Begins

Summer waned, one night early in September, frost fell heavily on Table Mountain. Then ice formed on still water. The horses' coats fluffed out thickly, to keep their wearers as comfortable as possible. That is a protection from the cold which nature gives horses. When the weather is warm the hair of their coats lies flat and close. But when a cold snap comes, each hair "stands on end," one might say, making a thick warm covering. That is one reason why horses can winter in the open without suffering, even in our cold western states or Alaska. On Table Mountain, a few days after the first frost, snow fell, though it melted before noon.

"Time we drove the stock from Table Mountain," Mr. Stevens announced one Saturday about the middle of September. "It's too cold up there at night now. Charlie, do you think you and Hank can manage the job?"

"Of course we could, Dad," Charlie quickly replied, pleased at the responsibility.

"Count me in on that," Helen said.

"Sure thing," was her brother's cheerful answer.

So Charlie, Helen, and Hank brought back the horses to Crescent Ranch. The mares knew what was expected of them, and followed the trail without urging. And the yearlings followed them, with just a little watching to keep them in line. All the stock was in splendid condition. The yearlings especially showed the benefits of plentiful, nourishing grass. They had grown much during their time on Table Mountain. The incident with Scamp had done them no real harm. Health and vigor and youthful high spirits showed in every step they took.

And how Sunlight had improved! In evidence now were the signs of the horse he was to be. He stood a hand and a half taller than the other yearlings. His rich chestnut coat gleamed. It had a silky texture. Sunny held his head high. His full dark eyes looked fearlessly on man and beast alike. As yet he had had no reason to fear either. Graceful strength characterized all his movements.

There was a springiness to his trot, and when he cantered or galloped the smooth rhythm of his motion was a joy to see.

Charlie, and in fact all the folks at the ranch, never tired of watching young Sunlight. The boy's eyes gleamed and his heart swelled with pride at the thought that someday he would be riding that beautiful animal, that he was his very own to break, to train, to teach all the things a western horse must know. And next year, at the close of the school term, he would be on Sunny's back!

Sunlight spent his second winter about as he did his first. He stayed at the ranch, and was fed grain and turned out with the horses kept in for use. It seemed as if Betsy and he had almost forgotten about each other. At any rate, the yearling paid very little attention to his mother, nor she to him. The summer's separation had wrought that change, which is the way with most animals. Betsy and Sundance, because they were so often taken out together, usually kept close to each other at pasture. It would be a pleasant thing to say that Betsy welcomed Sunlight back to Crescent Ranch with a joyful whinny. But we wouldn't be writing in accordance with a horse's nature were we to say that. Nor would it be in accordance with the habits of most wild animals. The mother instinct is all powerful in the spring, the season when the young are usually born. It continues through the summer, wanes fast as autumn comes, and almost disappears with the snows. Nature is preparing the way for the next year's offspring. The young may still run with the mother or with both parents when, as with wolves, they stay mated year after year. But instinct to protect them with their lives, to bring them food, to hunt for them has gone.

Of course Charlie let Sunny forget nothing of what he had been taught: to lead, to stand tied or with a rope trailing on the ground, to allow his feet to be lifted and held. These things were his "kindergarten" education.

Spring found Sunlight a well grown horse, not through with his growing, to be sure, but within a hand or two of his full size. Grain feeding throughout the winter had done much to develop him. And now, as the days lengthened, Charlie began his horse's "grade schooling." First he must accustom Sunlight to the feel of the saddle and to a weight on his back. A wide strap buckled around his body where a saddle girth would come was the first lesson. Purposely the boy left it rather loose. Sunny scarcely noticed the strap until Charlie began drawing it tighter. It worried him then. As long as

Charlie had his hands on him or was quite near, the horse was quiet enough. But as soon as he was left alone with that strap around him, he fidgeted. Often he would roll on the ground as if trying to dislodge the strap that way. It was the first time Sunny had resented anything that had been done to him.

"He'll get used to it," Mr. Stevens said.

Charlie had also been laying a saddle blanket over the young horse's back. It was one used on Betsy. The boy let his horse thoroughly investigate the blanket, and let him smell it before putting it in place. Sunlight didn't mind the blanket particularly. Then Charlie again placed the strap around him. Again Sunny became uneasy. He just didn't like to have anything tight around him. And a saddle girth must be tight. He must get used to the feeling of it.

That sort of training went on for several days until finally Charlie decided to saddle the horse. With all the preliminary work there should be nothing to it. A little fuss, perhaps, some jumping to the side, maybe some bucking.

"He won't know how to buck," Hank chided. "Sunny's just a house pet. And besides, young feller, the worst thing you could do is to let him buck with an empty saddle. Want me to climb on for the first ride?"

"Nope." Charlie was indignant. "I'm breaking this horse."

"Want me to stick round then and pick up the pieces?" Hank replied.

"You can stick around but there won't be any pieces," Charlie said.

The two boys were at the corral when Charlie decided to mount Sunlight. He was not certain that his father would be in favor of his riding the two-year-old, unless he were present to superintend the job. But Mr. Stevens had given no order against it. In fact, he had said that Sunny would be old enough to ride a little this spring. Certainly it wouldn't hurt him just to get on his back. And now Mr. Stevens was away for the day.

Charlie shut Sunny in the breaking corral, which is circular in shape instead of four-sided like the usual kind. Next he got his saddle. He intended to ride without a bridle, using just the hackamore and rope to guide his horse. The bridling would come later.

Sunny allowed himself to be saddled without much trouble. He

humped his back some as the cinches were tightened. The young horse did not quite understand just what Charlie was up to. His confidence in humanity told him that he probably wouldn't be hurt. But still this was something new.

Now Charlie, with lead rope in hand, stood ready to mount. Lightly he swung himself into the saddle. He did it so quickly that Sunny hardly knew what was happening. The horse tensed as he felt the weight on his back. He "humped" himself, tail clamped in tight, which is one sign in a horse that anything may happen. Still Sunny was not frightened. Why should he fear Charlie? The horse simply stood still.

"Well, how about some action?" Hank called. "You look fine just asitting there. But that's not breaking a horse."

Charlie could feel the tension gradually leaving Sunlight's muscles.

"Just wait a minute," was his answer. He somehow sensed that the horse was not going to submit too mildly to being ridden. After all, he was a range-bred animal sprung from generations of horses to which bucking came very naturally. Sunlight was a gentle horse, presumably bred from a gentle strain. But by the same token that a boy resents going back to school after his summer's vacation, so a western horse resists being put to work. And to buck is his natural reaction.

Charlie slapped Sunny lightly with the rope end. There was no force or sting to the blow, but the horse jumped as if he had been hit hard. And then he commenced bucking. To right and left he plunged, landing stiff-legged with a spine-jarring impact. He wasn't a practiced bucker. Compared to the performance that older and wilder horses could stage, Sunny's bucking seemed tame. But the young horse gave Charlie all he wanted to handle, for neither was he a practiced bronco-buster.

Once or twice the boy clutched the saddle horn to keep from being thrown.

"Who's pulling leather now?" Hank called, remembering the time White-Faced Black pitched him off.

Charlie didn't answer. He knew full well that it's better to "pull leather" than to let your horse throw you off. The main thing in breaking a bronc is to make him think that you are on his back to stay, and that nothing he can do can unseat you. And that's something of a job.

Finally Sunny stopped bucking. Charlie had stayed with him, which was as it ought to be. He was just a little proud of himself, but he was really prouder of Sunlight.

"Still think he's a house pet?" Charlie asked Hank. "Did you like the show?"

"I'll take that back about Sunny's being a house pet. He's all horse." Hank spoke in admiration.

"And you notice I stayed on," Charlie added.

"Sure thing." Hank slapped the boy on the back. "He'll buck some more, too. But you'll soon get it out of him. Sunny doesn't buck because of meanness. Matter of principle, I'd say."

Charlie hardly could wait to tell his father how he had ridden Sunny.

Mr. Stevens returned just in time for dinner. So it was at the table that Charlie broke the big news.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Helen was disappointed at not seeing Sunny ridden for the first time.

"Gee, Sis, I just didn't know I was going to do it myself until I got on. And after I got on I didn't think about anything but staying there," her brother replied. "But you be out at the corral tomorrow."

Mr. Stevens said, "I'm glad you got along all right. Looks to me as if you and Sunny have made a good start. And I'm pleased, too, that your horse bucked at the first ride. Shows spirit. But, for heaven's sake, son, don't encourage his bucking. Stop it now as soon as you can."

"It's kind of fun while it lasts, Dad."

Mr. Stevens laughed. "You and Sunny are just a couple of kids."

19

Sunny's High School Education

The next afternoon Charlie led Sunlight into the breaking corral again. Once more he saddled him and mounted. This time the little horse knew what was coming. He didn't mind the boy on his back now that the surprise was over. But instinct and high spirits prompted him to go through the performance of bucking. Of course now there were spectators, the whole Stevens family and Hank.

"I'll be there just in case you need help," the latter had told Charlie.

"I didn't need your help yesterday, did I?" Charlie retorted.

"Maybe not," Hank answered. "Did you ever hear of moral support? That was what I was."

"I didn't notice it," said Charlie.

"You were too busy to notice anything," replied Hank.

And at that Charlie let the matter drop.

This time Charlie was able to leave the saddle horn alone. He found that by watching Sunny's head he could tell pretty much what move the horse would make next, and be ready for it.

After watching Sunny a few minutes Mr. Stevens called to Charlie, "Get his head up! See if you can stop his bucking."

The horse had no bit in his mouth. He was being worked in what is known as a "hackamore," which is best described as a rope halter, usually of braided rope, with a lead rope attached to it. This lead rope may be used in place of reins by passing it over the horse's neck and tying its end to the hackamore again. Green horses are trained in this manner. In a corral they can't get away. The schooling with a bit comes later.

Charlie followed directions. Sunlight lifted his head and his bucks slowed and stopped.

"That's enough for today," the ranchman said. "We can't let your Sunny grow too fond of bucking."

Charlie saddled and rode Sunlight for a third time. The horse was growing accustomed to being saddled. He might switch his tail and prance a bit as the cinches were tightened. But except for that he

took the process as a matter of course. However, when the boy got into the saddle the fun began. It seemed almost as if Sunny thought that he was supposed to buck. To be sure, he stopped of his own accord when he had had enough and his bucks were not so violent that Charlie couldn't ride them out. But the habit seemed to be growing on the two-year-old. After Sunny had quieted down Charlie rode him over to his parents.

"Son, perhaps you ought not to ride Sunny until he's three years old. He may forget some of his foolishness then." Mr. Stevens turned to his wife, "What do you think, Mother?" There was a look in the ranchman's eye that showed he didn't really mean what he said.

Mrs. Stevens noted the expression of disappointment on Charlie's face. The boy's heart was set on riding Sunlight during the summer vacation, just for a half hour or so each day. He would still use Sundance for the long trips.

"I have an idea," the mother said. "We will try an experiment tomorrow afternoon."

So when Charlie saddled Sunlight on the next day, Hank led out Betsy for Mrs. Stevens. She mounted and rode into the breaking corral. Sunny nickered when the mare entered. As Charlie swung into the saddle his mother walked Betsy to the young horse's side. Sunny stepped off beside her, seemingly all thought of bucking gone from his mind.

"Now open the gate," said Mrs. Stevens. "See, it works like a charm. All Sunny needed was another horse to set him a good example."

"Looks as if you were right," answered her husband. "And, Charlie, keep Sunny down to just a walk for a week or so. You shouldn't have any real trouble with him but it's best to play safe."

So day after day Sunlight's training progressed. He was taught how to turn to left or right by the slight pressure of the rope against his neck. He still was ridden in the hackamore, not on a bridle with a bit in his mouth.

Perhaps just a few sentences of explanation might come in well here to tell how a saddle horse is guided differently from a horse in harness. When a horse is hitched to a sleigh for example, and the driver wants him to go to the right, he simply pulls on the right rein, which turns the horse's head in that direction. The horse just naturally moves to the right.

But when a rider wants his mount to go to the right, he presses the left rein against the horse's neck, though not too heavily so as to cause a decided pull on the bit. A green horse at first pays little attention to the rein against his neck. It's not like the pull of the bit in his mouth, which almost compels his turning in the direction of the pull.

Many ways and tricks are used to teach the young horse to be "bridle-wise" as an easterner says or "neck reined" as the westerner calls it. One way might be to ride him along a fence to a corner, and when he has to turn, press the rein against his neck on the side opposite to the way he is turning. Or another one would be to have a second rider head off the green horse, forcing him over to right or left with his own mount. The man on the young horse would again press the rein on the side of the neck opposite to the direction the horse would have to turn. A horse soon learns what he is expected to do and to associate the rein against his neck with a change of direction.

Helen on Betsy helped Charlie by the latter method, glad to have a hand in the training of Sunlight. With the constant, though light use, he had apparently forgotten all about his bucking. Of course he was playful and would prance and caper as any healthy young animal should. As Sunny learned the meaning of the neck rein, Charlie trotted and loped him in circles and figure eights. He taught him to start at a walk, trot, or lope at the pressure of his legs or touch of heel, and to stop at the command "whoa."

The use of a bridle instead of the hackamore bothered Sunny a little. It took him some time to grow used to the feel of the bit in his mouth. But it was a snaffle bit, not a curb with strap or chain to tighten on his jaw. Charlie seldom exerted anything but the mildest pressure on it, so soon the horse grew to accept the bridle as he had the saddle.

With the passing of the summer vacation Sunlight became a fully trained saddle horse. Next he must learn to be a cow horse, for on the following summer Mr. Stevens had promised Charlie that he could go out with the round-up.

That third winter Sunlight spent again at the ranch but this time Charlie rode him whenever he had the chance. Sundance definitely played second fiddle now.

"But I'll take you out on the round-up next summer, old boy." Charlie spoke as if he thought that his old horse might need

consolation.

20

The Round-up

At last the day came when Charlie with Sunlight and Sundance left for the range, to join in the task of rounding up the cattle, and branding the calves, and to give the range stock, both cattle and horses, a general inspection.

The Crescent was primarily a horse ranch, but Mr. Stevens, together with his brother Henry, owned a large number of cattle. The cattle ranch was located on the Clearwater about fifteen miles below Crescent Ranch. Its brand was a cart wheel.

On the cattle ranges the stock is regularly rounded up both spring and fall. In the spring the calves are branded, each marked with the brand of its mother. And of course all animals are counted. In the autumn the cows and half-grown calves are driven to their winter range, and the stock ready for market is sorted and shipped. Charlie as yet might not be quite big enough to do a man's work on the round-up. But there were dozens of things he could do. The boy was looking forward with joy to the days and nights in the open, riding his horses and training Sunny to be a top cow pony. He knew there would be days when the scorching sun would seem to burn the earth, that there would be drenching storms which he would have to ride through. He also knew that he was equal to any ordinary hardship and hoped to be able to rise to any emergency.

Charlie arrived at his uncle's the noon before the day planned for the start of the round-up. He turned Sunlight and Sundance into the big corral with other horses which the cowboys were going to ride or which were to haul the wagons. After lunch and a short visit with his aunt at the ranch house, he went out again to the corral to look over the remuda, as the horses used in working cattle are called, and of course to see how his own two were faring. Ranch horses are so used to seeing other horses come and go that two strange animals attracted little attention. They kept together as is the habit of horses that have grown to know each other well. They would do that as long as they were on the range. Charlie soon satisfied himself that the Crescent Ranch animals were all right.

Then he went to the bunkhouse to see if anyone he knew was there. But, as he half expected, that place was empty. This was too busy a day for any able-bodied hand to be in the bunkhouse, unless he had ridden night herd. But about the middle of the afternoon the cowboys commenced to ride in.

Each rider as he noticed Sunlight paused astonished.

"Look at that chestnut!" they would exclaim.

Then seeing Charlie with an unmistakable expression of pride on his face, they next would ask, "Where did he come from? Is he yours? He's too good a horse to use punching cows. Lots can happen to hurt him."

Charlie hadn't really thought of that. He resolved right there and then to be mighty careful of Sunlight.

Next morning at daybreak the wagons were moved out, four horses hitched to each. There were three,—a cook wagon, a bedding wagon, and one loaded with wood, rope, and all the things necessary in a cow camp. Charlie and the cowboys had selected their horses from the corral. Each rider roped the horse he wanted. Once roped, that animal stood quietly while the saddle was put on.

But no roping was necessary for Sunlight. The horse came to meet Charlie, took the bit into his mouth without any forcing on the boy's part, and like any good saddle horse, stood quietly while Charlie cinched the saddle.

A dozen cowboys stopped whatever they were doing to watch Sunny.

"Some well-broke horse," one of them said. "It takes a lot of time to train 'em like that."

"Took me just about three years," Charlie answered, thinking back to the time he rescued Sunny from the swollen Clearwater.

Just then Charlie's uncle came up and said to him, "Your job today will be to drive this saddle stock to the campground. The boys will want some of them for this afternoon's work. They shouldn't be hard to handle since they have been worked right along."

"I guess I can manage 'em," Charlie replied, proud at having a real job to do.

The cowboys had ridden away on the horses they had chosen, leaving about thirty in the corral.

Someone opened the corral gate and Charlie drove out the band. Western horses are used to being driven in herds. It's surprising how large a number one rider can handle. Of course he must use a

lot of common sense and must know what to expect of horses. And quite contrary to the movies and stirring western fiction, they are very seldom driven at a run, or "high lope," as a ranchman would say. Charlie took his time and moved the remuda along steadily and quietly. Some of the horses would have to work that afternoon and it wouldn't do to bring them into camp tired out.

Sunny soon showed that he knew what was expected of him, answering quickly and very willingly every command Charlie gave. When it was necessary to head back into the bunch some horse that showed an inclination to break away, Sunlight was off in a flash at a touch of Charlie's heel to turn him. The boy could feel in the horse he rode the instinct to handle stock which had been handed down from generations of cow ponies.

In a little less than three hours Charlie brought the horses into camp. His uncle had been watching for him and as he noticed the quiet, capable way his nephew had done the first task given him, he smiled.

His praise, "A good job, Charlie," made the boy glad to be at work.

A cowhand took over the horses and drove them to a creek for a drink and then he allowed them to graze. Charlie unsaddled Sunny, rubbed his sweaty back, and then let him trot away to join the others. Sundance greeted him with a whinny of welcome.

Presently a dust cloud appeared on the sky line.

"There comes the morning's drag," said Henry Stevens. "After we've had some grub we'll ride down and look them over."

He referred to the cattle which the cowboys had gathered together in their first half day's work. These would be held at some suitable place a little distance away from camp until the branding was completed. Sometimes the riders who drove in the cattle did that job, but usually it was turned over to a branding crew.

Soon the cowboys came in, unsaddled their horses and turned them loose. They would use fresh ones for the afternoon's work. The horses worked but half a day, then they would have nothing to do for two or three days. Each rider had a string of at least four mounts and used them in rotation. This seems like asking very little work of a young, sound horse as measured by eastern ways. But the cow ponies were fed neither oats nor hay and had to rustle for themselves. They must be kept strong and fast, and since that can't be done by extra feeding, longer periods of rest between their turns of work must be given to them.

The men on the wagons had stretched a rope corral as soon as they had prepared lunch. In a few minutes Henry Stevens said to Charlie:

"Ride along with Jeff. Watch him drive the horses into that rope corral. I'm thinking of giving you the job of taking charge of the horses, during the daytime anyway. I guess a growing young feller needs some sleep, so I'll give someone else the night herding to do. There will be some more horses in tomorrow. We couldn't do the work ahead of us with the forty-five or fifty head we have here now."

"Uncle Henry, that's just what I'd like to do."

Charlie and Jeff soon had the remuda within the rope corral. The open side was closed and the cowboys roped the horses they required. In the morning they had swept the range south of camp clear of cattle. This afternoon they would work the country to the north. The cows gathered would be held on the "bedding ground" for the night. The calves would be branded in the morning while the riders moved on to new territory. After their work was completed the branding crew would follow to the new camp, which had been made fifteen or twenty miles farther on. Camp locations must of necessity be determined by the available feed and water. Hungry, thirsty stock is restless stock, hard to work and to hold together. But this year rain had been sufficient, pasturage was good, and the range cattle and horses were all in excellent shape.

Charlie reveled in the life outdoors. After seeing that Sunlight and Sundance were all right, he seated himself with cowhands around the fire, drinking in all the talk of the range, joining in the songs, completely enjoying himself. Soon he found himself nodding. Then before he realized it he had fallen asleep. His uncle's hand was on his shoulder.

"Better turn in, young feller."

Charlie got into his bedding roll. He lay awake a few moments, looking up at the stars, watching the flickering lights from the campfire. The cowboys, too, had grown sleepy. Their singing had ceased. They scarcely spoke at all. Someone started to put some fresh wood on the fire.

"Let her die down, Bert," another said. "We have to haul that wood. And I'm ready for some sleep."

Soon the whole camp was quiet. The faint sound of the cropping of the few picketed horses, kept near for early morning use, the voices of the night herders, and the bell on one of the horses in the

remuda down by the creek, only made the stillness more pronounced.

Before daylight, even before the eastern horizon paled, the cooks were astir, building the fires, getting breakfast ready. Then the whole camp was awake in the gray light of early dawn.

Charlie was ready when his uncle came to him.

"Grab some breakfast and let the night herder come in, Charlie. Now your day's work begins."

The boy's meal of coffee, bacon, and flapjacks soon disappeared. He saddled one of the picketed horses and was gone. The night man was watching for him.

"How did my horses behave?" was Charlie's first question.

"Fine," the herder answered. "Except that chestnut of yours seemed anxious to go to camp. Had to keep my eye on him and your other horse. They tried to leave a few times but they settled down after a while. Boy! That chestnut is some horse!"

Sunlight greeted Charlie with a glad whinny and came up to him. Sundance followed right behind.

"He knows you all right!" the herder said. "Regular pet. I had one like him, too, when I was about your age. Not as good, though."

The cowhand took the saddle off the night horse. He replaced it on the animal Charlie had brought down. The boy saddled his favorite.

"I'll just work you for a little while," he said. "It's Sundance's turn today."

He gathered the remuda together and drove it toward camp. The rope corral had been left up for the night and now he headed the horses into it.

Then Charlie saw the value of the bell horse, a quiet, sensible old fellow who knew what was expected of him. He went directly into the corral, and the rest followed him closely, quite from habit.

After the cowboys had roped their horses for the morning's work, Uncle Henry said to Charlie, "We'll camp on Elk Flats tonight. Head for there."

The boy changed to Sundance for the ride. The wagon crew took down the corral and Charlie started the remuda on its way. The morning went much like the one of the day before. These were seasoned, quiet horses, taught to attend to business, with their surplus energy consumed by hard work.

21

With the Branding Crew

A few hours after sunrise the next morning, Hank and a cowboy named Sam Maxwell arrived in camp with another band of horses forty strong. This now made a sizable remuda. Charlie began to have his doubts about being able to handle it, particularly as a large proportion of the new animals were green. This would be their first round-up. The boy told his uncle of his misgivings.

"We'll keep an eye on you for a few days, my boy," Henry Stevens reassured his nephew. "Having so many seasoned horses in the bunch will make it easier for you. And that new stock is a bit fagged out. It's the riders rather than you who may have trouble."

And the cattleman was right. The larger number of horses increased Charlie's work very little. They were so used to following a leader, and being driven in herds since colthood, that the habit remained. Even the night rider had little difficulty. Three or four older horses now wore bells. Their ringing apparently kept the herd together.

Day followed day in the accustomed routine of a cow camp. Charlie wanted to try Sunlight on roping. Of course the horse was thoroughly used to the swinging and swish of a rope. His master, time and again, had roped calves from his back and had thrown them by flipping the lariat over their hindquarters and tightening it in. Naturally, with the loop around their necks, when the rope was pulled taut, the calves turned a somersault. Charlie always immediately released the little animals. His father didn't greatly approve of throwing the cattle unnecessarily. After a few trials he had said to his son,

"Wait for the round-up, Charlie. Train Sunny then."

After he had worked with the remuda for about a week, Charlie went to his uncle.

"Uncle Henry, could I help with the branding once in a while?"

"Tired of the horses?" Henry Stevens inquired.

"No, but I want to teach Sunny to be a top cow horse. He's not learning much about cows now."

"He's learning a lot about working a herd, though, Charlie," the cattleman replied. "Sure, you can help with the branding," he continued. "I'll have one of the crew take your place for a while. Maybe you'd like to switch jobs and help with the branding right along."

"I'll stick with the horses," Charlie quickly replied. "I like them better."

The next day found Charlie and Sunlight turning up for work with the branding crew. The cows and calves driven in on the previous day had been held overnight on the bed grounds. Now cowboys rode in among them, roping and dragging out the calves. The fires had been lit and the irons were red hot.

"You take the little ones, son," one of the older cowhands advised Charlie. "There's no use of getting that swell horse of yours yanked around by some big stubborn calf. Wait till he learns what it's all about before you start on the heavy stock."

Charlie thought that was good advice.

He rode into the edge of the herd, saw the calf he wanted, and drove it toward the fire. No cowboy ropes his calf until he has to. It's much easier to drive it than to drag it. And that applies to man, horse, and calf. The cow insisted on going along with her calf, which is usually the way it works. When they were as near the fire as they could be driven without difficulty, Charlie swung his rope. He was expert enough so that to put his loop over a calf's head was child's play. Then he took a turn of the rope around his saddle horn. Sunny dragged the calf to the branding crew. There, giving the rope a certain amount of slack so that he could flip it over the calf's back, he turned Sunlight to one side. A cowhand grasped the calf's head. Sunlight pulled his feet from under him, and the calf was down. One of the crew placed his knee on the calf's neck to hold it on the ground, while another pressed the hot iron on the shoulder for an instant—just long enough to burn the hair roots so they would never grow again.

Henry Stevens rode up to see how Charlie was progressing.

"Nice work, boy," he said as he watched his nephew work. "But you'll spoil that crew of mine, throwing their calves for them like that."

"Oh, I'm training my horse. And the boys will soon get over being spoiled," Charlie grinned.

The branding crew grinned.

"Sure's a handy pony," was their comment.

Every other morning Sunlight and Charlie worked with the branding crew. The horse soon learned just what calf he was expected to cut out. He became so adept that his master seldom had to give him a direction. And he took to the work like a duck to water.

Charlie missed not using Sunlight when he was driving the remuda from camp to camp. Probably it would not have been too much for the horse if, in addition to the work with the branding crew, he also helped with the remuda. But Charlie thought otherwise, and used Sundance or one of his uncle's horses for the herding.

22

Sunlight Holds the Remuda

By this time even the green broncos had settled into the routine of the cow camp. A few days of hard work soon took the "hump out of their backs" and taught them that, since it seemed that they had to obey man, they might as well do it with as little trouble to themselves as possible. The night herder, Jeff, was having less and less to do to keep the remuda together. Perhaps he became just a bit careless. He relaxed his vigilance a little.

And then it happened! The stock had been restless. There was something in the air which kept them on edge. From sundown until midnight they seemed to have an urge to leave the bedding ground. This applied to both the horses and the cattle. Jeff turned one horse after another back into the herd. Even the sedate bell horses were not feeding as steadily as usual. Often they stood, head up, nostrils flaring, testing the wind. Toward the middle of the night, lightning flickered behind the distant mountain peaks, throwing them in silhouette against its brightness. Thunder rumbled, reverberating through the valleys.

Jeff had kept his night horse so constantly on the go that the animal was tired. For an hour he had felt him limping beneath him. But with the remuda in such a jumpy state he hesitated to rope out a fresh horse and change, thinking that perhaps just at the time when he was switching the saddle some of the horses might take advantage of the chance to get away. Finally Jeff's horse went so lame that he just couldn't be used.

"What's wrong, cayuse?" he said as he dismounted.

His horse shifted all weight to his right foreleg. Jeff picked up his foot. Wedged tightly into it in the angle of shoe and frog was a sharp pointed stone. Jeff tried to remove it with his fingers but found it too firmly embedded. He searched for another stone with which to hammer it and loosen it. There was one an arm's length away. He reached for it and as he stretched out his arm he heard a rasping rattle, the warning of the deadly diamondback rattlesnake. The horse plunged, throwing Jeff off his balance. The snake struck. Its

fangs sank into the man's right hand.

In a frenzy, Jeff drew his six shooter. Twice he fired. Then with his knife he cut deep gashes through the punctures made by the snake's fangs.

Two shots were the trouble signal for the Cartwheel cowboys. Instantly the camp was awake. Two riders were on the picketed horses, racing to Jeff's aid. One was Henry Stevens, the other—Charlie.

Meanwhile the remuda had stampeded.

Charlie's heart sank when he saw that the horses had disappeared, Sunlight with them.

But a man's life was at stake!

"Go get the serum!" the cattleman ordered tersely. "Here, take my horse, too. They'll need him to bring back the serum. Tell someone to ride to the ranger station. Tell 'em to send in a plane! Jeff must get to a hospital!"

Charlie grasped the reins of the second horse, and set spurs to his own. Galloping into camp, he yelled,

"Rattler got Jeff! Take the serum to him. I'm off to the ranger station." He dropped the reins of the led horse.

Again Charlie spurred his mount. Fifteen miles to go even to reach a telephone. And every second counted, if a man's life were to be saved. How he wished for fleet Sunlight. No need to spur that willing animal.

-

And how about the remuda? What of Sunny and Sundance?

Like a swollen stream bursting its dam the herd had stampeded at those two shots. Though accustomed to the sound of shooting, Jeff's signal shots proved just enough to send the uneasy and nervous remuda into crazy flight. Even the bell horses were swept along, and young Sunlight raced away, too. This herd terror was something new to him.

In fact, Sunny saw or heard nothing to frighten him. Nor had Sundance. But they had galloped off with the rest, perhaps because they didn't know what else to do.

After two or three miles the remuda slackened its wild pace. The bell horses and some of the animals that had worked hard that day dropped back. Sunlight and Sundance had trailed the rear of the herd from the first. They saw no sense in this wild running, anyway.

The herd slowed down to a trot, then to a walk. Presently the horses were grazing again.

The thunderstorm had passed up a distant valley. A waning crescent moon rose over the mountain summits. The air had discharged its electricity. All the animals, the cattle, the horses, and the wild things relaxed and went about their usual business of living.

Sunlight and Sundance felt uneasy. Something seemed to say to them that they were needed, that their human friends were in trouble, that work had to be done on the coming day which, without their help, could not be done. Together they started toward camp, slowly, so that the bell horses would follow. They stopped to graze, and when the herd had caught up, grazed a little farther on, always toward camp. Apparently the good bell horses caught their meaning and seconded their intentions. Gradually and steadily the remuda drew near camp.

Dawn came and with it a hum in the clouds that soon became a roar.

"Here comes the plane!" yelled the cowboys, with intense relief in their voices.

"And here come the horses!" they yelled again as they saw the remuda returning.

But no one ever knew how Sunlight and Sundance brought them back.

Sunlight whinnied, head raised, eyes searching.

Henry Stevens went to the horse and stroked his sleek neck.

"He'll be back soon, boy," he said.

Just then the wind brought a call.

"Hi, Sunny!"

Sunlight neighed loudly and raced toward the call. Sundance followed.

Charlie came in sight, riding a horse almost tumbling with fatigue. His two horses trotted beside him. The boy tied the reins on the saddle of the horse he rode and dismounted.

"Here, boy!" he said to Sunny and vaulted on his back. "This horse has helped save a man's life. You carry me in. We'll just stay beside him."

Without a saddle or bridle on him, Sunlight quietly walked beside the spent horse. Willing cowboys in camp took the latter in hand and rubbed him down and picketed him where grass was best. Then

they gave him water sparingly, lest in his thirst he drink too much and founder himself.

And Uncle Henry came to Charlie and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Good work," again was all he said, but a world of affection and appreciation was behind those two words.

Jeff recovered, though it was months before he rode again.

23

A *Marauder*

The spring round-up was finished. Sunlight had proved his worth.

"I'm glad you didn't try him on the big stuff," Mr. Stevens said, when Charlie told him how cleverly Sunny had handled the calves. "Your horse will weigh a couple of hundred pounds more next summer. Time enough then to rope the big steers and cows from his back. I'd say now he's about like a freshman at college. Not quite 'varsity' stuff."

"Can't we go on the fall round-up, Dad?" Charlie asked rather wistfully.

"We'll have to see about that. Remember it's more strenuous than the spring one. Lots colder, and those wild beef critters are harder to handle than the cows and calves. Rides are much longer, too, for we have to move the steers to the railroad. Maybe there will be snow. I wouldn't be surprised if I said, 'Wait 'til next year.' And then, there is school, you know."

Charlie felt that he and Sunlight would not be in the fall round-up. He consoled himself with the thought that he would have the rest of the summer to enjoy his horse, and that Helen and he could have long rides together. He had never ceased to admire the fine appearance the mare and colt made when they were out together. Brother and sister began to test the speeds of the two horses to see which was the faster. Sunlight now was of an age when thoroughbreds are raced for a mile or more in contrast to the shorter distances at which two-year-olds are run. He might be as fast now as he ever would be and certainly by next spring he would have attained his full measure of speed. Betsy could still hold her own with him. Charlie had not yet asked Sunlight to run his fastest. He was content just to let him gallop alongside the mare. The boy knew that Helen hated to think of the time when Sunlight could outrun his dam. Her pride in Betsy was as great as was Charlie's in Sunny.

The summer passed quickly and pleasantly. Day after day Charlie, Helen, and Mrs. Stevens rode their horses over the range. The

father seldom could accompany them these days. Ranch work kept him busier than he ever had been before. He began to depend on Charlie's reports about the condition of the stock within fair riding distance of the Crescent Ranch.

"Keep your eyes open, son," he said. "Watch our fences. I'm depending on you to keep things in good shape near home."

Sunlight and Sundance took their turns on those trips. Often Charlie rode alone. He would spend many hours seated on some rock or stump, looking out over the rolling country. He formed the habit of carrying field glasses with him, the better to watch the wild things within vision and to examine the cattle without riding near. He was particularly interested in a band of prong-horned antelope. These he could always depend on finding within a mile or so of Mercury Butte. There were seven does and ten fawns in the bunch. He counted them often and rejoiced to think that there was such an encouraging increase. The antelope was his father's favorite animal which, as we've said, he always protected. Henry Stevens did the same.

Then one day Charlie could count only nine fawns. Helen was with him then. He handed her the glasses.

"See if you can find the missing fawn," he said.

"I see just nine," she said after several minutes of careful search. "All the does are there and that old buck and the two young bucks. Maybe the missing fawn is hidden somewhere. Let's ride nearer and make them move."

Charlie counted again after the antelope had changed their location. "One is missing all right. I'd hoped they would all live to grow up. Well, we have to expect a few losses. Dad will be sorry. Coyote got it, I suppose."

"We'll come out again tomorrow," Helen said. "And say, those antelope ought to be able to outrun a coyote."

"Maybe there was a weakling among them," Charlie replied.

But on the next day still another fawn had disappeared. Charlie said little at the time.

On the way home Sunlight suddenly shied. Betsy, too, showed fear. Charlie turned the horse back.

"What's the matter, Sunny?"

But the horse refused to go near a certain clump of sagebrush.

Charlie rode him off a little way, then dismounted, and came back to investigate. In the sagebrush he saw the head and a few bones of

an antelope fawn.

"Well, there's one of them," he said sadly. "All that's left of it. But I don't see why that would make our horses so afraid. They have often seen dead animals on the range."

"Perhaps they smell coyote," Helen replied.

"Even then I don't think that would account for Sunny's and Betsy's actions. They've known about coyotes all their lives. I've got to do something about it. I hate to see those antelope disappear," Charlie continued.

"What can we do?" asked Helen.

"That's what I'd like to know," her brother replied. "Let's not tell Dad unless he asks us. He seems to have a lot on his mind these days."

Charlie gave Sunlight an extra measure of oats that night, and before he went to bed, he took his leather chaps and twenty-two caliber repeater in its scabbard out to the barn, and left them near his saddle. He was careful that no one saw him do this. Charlie wished to avoid questions. What he planned to do was his adventure, his and Sunlight's.

Light from a moon three days past the full, flooded the world when Charlie tiptoed downstairs two hours before dawn. He fed Sunlight. Then when the horse had finished his breakfast, he saddled him and rode quietly away. His rifle hung from his saddle. Sunlight went into a gentle lope at his rider's command, heading for a point from which Charlie had often watched the antelope. When he got there the boy, with his glasses, scanned the country spread out before him. Nothing moved within his range of vision. He dismounted and climbed on the rock from which he often watched. Again he examined carefully every object that might be an antelope.

Was something moving down there in the moonlight a mile away? Charlie strained his eyes. Then he saw the antelope, coming at breakneck speed! They were just vague moving forms in the sagebrush, but they must be the antelope. No other creatures run as they do. But why their flight?

Quickly Charlie mounted Sunlight. The willing horse swung at once into a high lope. Well he knew that something was afoot that required his speed. And well, too, he knew that now his master was depending on him to pick his way, no matter how rough the going. Gopher holes might be hidden in the shadows of the moonlight or sharp rocks or rolling stones. His job it was to avoid these and carry

his master safely to his destination.

Charlie rode down out of sight. It was not his plan to chase the fleeing antelope. He intended to pursue whatever it was that was hunting them.

Without the advantage of the height of land, and unable to use his field glasses, Charlie had trouble following the band of antelope. From his knowledge of the range he knew about what direction they would have to take. And he knew that they would trust to their fleetness for escape, rather than try to double back to throw their pursuer off their trail as would deer. He trusted, too, to Sunny's knowledge of what was expected of him. That might be asking much of a horse that had only run calves before in his life. But good horses like good dogs have a way of divining their master's wishes, and Charlie counted on this trait in his horse.

And then! Sunlight almost slid to a full stop! Snorting, wild eyed, he turned. Many a good rider would have been unseated by the suddenness of the horse's unexpected action. Charlie swayed in the saddle but kept his balance. He checked Sunny. The horse was trembling with fear, for he had caught a scent in the air that had filled him with instinctive dread. And a feeling of fear swept over the boy as well. But that sensation passed almost instantly. Charlie was not the sort to be easily frightened. There was nothing dangerous out here on the range. Nothing but rattlesnakes. And here was no snake.

He tried to calm Sunlight. "What is it, boy?" he said. "Come, get around here."

As if Charlie's confidence reassured the horse, his trembling lessened. He still snorted loudly and showed the whites of his eyes in terror. But now he responded again to his master's voice and touch. His courage was returning.

"Come, let's get going," Charlie ordered, touching Sunny lightly with his spurs. He almost never used spurs on any horse, but he had been taught that there were times when a horse had to be forced to do things against his will, and that spurs were the simplest and most direct way of doing it.

Sunlight leaped forward, still fearful, but urged on by his master's will.

"I'll let nothing hurt you, Sunny," Charlie told him. "Surely you're not afraid of coyotes."

"Maybe it's not a coyote," the boy thought to himself.

Sunlight's fright had cost time. Charlie sent him on faster. Dawn was coming now, and in the increasing light he could see the faint dust cloud raised by the fleeing antelope. The horse by now had nearly forgotten his fear. His thoughts were on the race with those fleet creatures ahead of him. He put his whole heart into his running and slowly gained ground.

Now the flock of antelope was flying over an area free of sagebrush. Here the short grass revealed their speeding fawns. Suddenly Charlie saw the reason for their flight. A gray shape tore after them, intent on running down a half-grown fawn, weakening from exhaustion.

Charlie whipped his rifle from its scabbard. He turned Sunny toward the gray shape. The horse's eyes showed fear, and his nostrils flared even wider, but he obeyed.

A *gray wolf*! Charlie knew instantly that it was no coyote he hunted. Here was the ancient killer of the plains, the creature that once preyed on the mighty bison.

And the boy had only a twenty-two.

As Sunny bore down on him, the wolf turned, heading for the sagebrush. Charlie must shoot him before he reached that cover. And he must get close. He must shoot from Sunny's back at full gallop. No time now to dismount and fire.

Sunlight was running his speediest. A wolf is no match for a truly fast horse. He was gaining. At fifty feet Charlie fired and missed. He shot again and missed. At his third shot he hit the wolf. The creature rolled completely over, then recovered himself and went on. The tiny bullet had struck no vital spot, but his speed was lessened. In no time at all Sunlight was beside him. Again Charlie shot three times in quick succession. This time the killer went down to stay.

Charlie dismounted and examined the wolf. He looked at his long keen fangs and shuddered.

"If these things come back to the range, we are in for trouble," he thought to himself. And then he turned to Sunny, standing staunchly but eyeing the dead wolf with dread.

"I don't blame you, Sunny," Charlie said, his hand on the horse's lathered neck. "I'm afraid now, myself. But you never failed me. We got our wolf together."

He mounted and started for home. The antelope had stopped running. They watched him depart. They knew that he had not

been hunting them.

The family were watching anxiously as Charlie rode into the ranch yard.

"We got him, Sis!" Charlie announced. And Helen knew what he meant. "But it was really Sunny's work," Charlie continued. "If he weren't the horse he is, there would be one more gray wolf in the world."

"A gray wolf!" exclaimed Mr. Stevens. "It's good you killed him, son. That's the first one seen around here for twenty years. How did you do it?"

"Sunny did the job. I was just the boss," answered the boy. Then he told of Sunny's terror and of his courage in overcoming it. He told of his speed and of his quick understanding of what he was required to do; and last, of how he bravely raced beside the wolf so that his master could finish him.

"I hope there are no more of those grays in this section," his father said. "The coyotes are bad enough, but they can't kill grown stock. Keep a sharp lookout for signs of any more of those bloodthirsty animals."

24

Sunny Learns a New Game

A week before school opened, Lt. George Stevens, one of Charlie's cousins, visited the Crescent Ranch. He had just graduated from an eastern college maintaining a Reserve Officers' Training Corps for field artillery. He had played on the polo team and was an excellent horseman. Knowing he would do a lot of riding he brought an English saddle with him, preferring it to the heavy western stock saddles.

Hank's eyes opened in surprise when he first saw one of the Crescent horses with the lieutenant's saddle on his back.

"Gee! I'd fall off if I tried to ride on that thing," he exclaimed. "What do you do if your horse bucks?"

"Well, we do the best we can. But our eastern horses don't really know much about bucking," George Stevens answered. "Once in a while we find one which can buck, but we'd hardly use him for pleasure riding. And that's about all we use saddle horses for back home." He turned to the ranchman who had just joined the group. "You have some fine polo prospects in your herd, Uncle Walter. It would be fun to try out a few of them with a mallet and ball. That white-tailed chestnut you call Sunlight ought to make a wonderful polo pony. That mare Helen rides would be another good one."

"How much are polo ponies worth?" Mr. Stevens was really interested in the idea of training them.

"That all depends on their quality. Any good polo pony would bring five hundred dollars and there is almost no limit to the price of exceptionally fine ones, like that Sunlight horse. I've about a dozen polo sticks at home. I'll write Mother and ask her to send you about half of them. It's hard to say when I'll see a polo field again. They might all be turned into air fields. Maybe we could find a couple of mallets around here somewhere, and an English saddle or two. That pasture down by the river is level enough to use to knock a ball around even if it isn't very smooth."

Charlie took to the idea of trying Sunny as a polo pony. "We'll make a playboy out of you," he told his horse. "Just one of those

fancy dude ponies." But he well knew that polo is a game where superb horsemanship, courage, daring, and great skill are needed.

Charlie was lucky enough to find three old mallets and a couple of balls that a summer boarder had left at a neighbor's ranch. He and George took Sunlight and Sundance to the level pasture and began knocking a ball around. Both horses were so accustomed to having ropes thrown from their backs that they paid little attention to the mallets. The crack as the mallet head struck the ball bothered them a little at first and caused them to shy. But in a very short time the horses became used to that also.

All the people at the ranch were interested in the experiment and came out to see Charlie and George. They admired the latter's sureness in the saddle and his ease of balance. His manner of riding was so different from theirs that it amused them. Of course the Stevens and their ranch hands knew of the eastern way of horseback riding, of posting to a trot, of leaning forward in the saddle at the canter or gallop, which they would call a "lope" or "high lope."

"He certainly can stick to that leather pancake he's sitting on," Hank remarked after watching George Stevens ride for ten minutes. "And he knows how to hit 'em!" he exclaimed as the polo player sent the light willow wood ball flying through the air for a hundred yards or so to land and bounce and roll for another hundred feet.

"Seems to me that maybe there is something to that game," a cowhand said. "Looks as if you had to be mighty accurate like, to send a little ball where you want it to go, riding that fast. Have to try it myself someday." Then he laughed. "Look at Charlie! He can hardly hit the ball."

And the cowboy was right. What George did apparently with such ease, the boy found very difficult. At first the lieutenant advised him to ride up to the ball at a walk, striking from the right side of his horse to send the ball forward. Even then Charlie was likely to strike the ground behind the ball or just to top it, so it rolled only a few feet. Or again, he would strike it near one end or the other of the mallet's head so that the ball would roll off at an angle.

Helen was fascinated by the way George swung his mallet on the right or left side, sending the ball flying forward swiftly in a low arc, or to the rear with a smashing back stroke. He could reach with his stick under Sundance's neck and hit the ball to the side, as if knocking it to a teammate who might have a clearer shot at the goal.

He was careful to swing the mallet clear of Sundance's legs. "Don't want to hit you a crack," he said, patting the horse's shoulder. "You have no boots to protect you, so I'll have to look out."

Several times he withheld his stroke when Sundance ran too close to the ball. With a perfectly protected pony under him he would have played the ball, trusting to the stout leather leg boots or cotton padded wrapping to save the horse from injury.

"I always thought they hit the ball with the end of the mallet just as you'd drive a nail with a hammer," Helen said to her mother. "George always keeps the head broadside to the ball. That must be right if he does it. Guess I've learned something I didn't know before."

"To tell the truth, I didn't know it either." Mrs. Stevens smiled at the way she had taken for granted what so many people think, that a polo mallet strikes the ball as a croquet mallet does.

After about fifteen minutes George rode up to the group of onlookers. "Guess that's enough for this horse," he said.

"What?" his uncle said surprised. "Sundance has hardly turned a hair. He could do that sort of thing for a couple of hours without its hurting him. He's just a little sweaty on his neck, that's all."

"Seven and a half minutes is all we play a pony. One chukker, then we change to a fresh mount. We'll use our first one again in the second half of the game," George explained. "I've already ridden Sundance for as long a time as he would work in a game unless we were very short of horses. Then he might have to work three chukkers."

"Gosh, George!" the ranchman chuckled, "twenty-two and a half minutes! That's awful. What does he do with the rest of the day? And say, does he have to play every day?"

"No, just three or four times a week in a polo season, from May until October," the lieutenant replied. "They are exercised each day, though, mostly just by being led at a walk for a half hour or so."

"Well, your polo ponies have a hard life," Mr. Stevens laughed.

Charlie rode up. He'd done all his polo at a walk or slow lope so Sunlight hadn't a wet hair on him.

"Let me try your horse, Charlie," George suggested.

"Sure thing," the boy readily agreed. He removed Sunny's saddle, and George replaced it with his own. The polo player mounted and pressed Sunlight with his knees. The horse stiffened in surprise. He showed no fear but he refused to budge.

A stranger was on his back!

George lightly touched him with his spurs.

Sunny humped his back as if he intended to buck. He had forgotten all about bucking after those first few days. The instinct still was there, dormant perhaps but ready to come to light under adverse circumstances. The horse felt the friendliness of the man on his back. But he wasn't Charlie, his master.

Charlie stared in astonishment at Sunlight's disobedience. He went to his horse and slapped him flat-handed on his haunches. "Get going, there!" he ordered. Sunny looked back at the boy but stood still. Then Charlie led him by the bridle. The horse stepped out alongside of him willingly enough. When the boy let go the bridle and stepped aside the horse again stopped short.

"Well, that's a new one!" he said, puzzled. And then he happened to think: *This was the first time anyone except himself had been on Sunlight's back!*

Helen brought up Betsy. "Try my horse, cousin George," she offered. "I know she's not so particular about who rides her."

And Charlie asked, "Let me see what it feels like to ride on a flat saddle."

"Help yourself, young feller," George good-naturedly replied. "This will be the first time I've ever swung a polo stick from a western saddle. I suppose it can be done."

"And this is the first time I've ridden one without a back and front to it. Hope I can stay somewhere near the middle," Charlie said as he started Sunny on a lope.

George rode Betsy for about as long as he had used Sundance. The swinging of the polo stick and the crack of its impact against the ball never bothered her a bit. She was used to all sorts of things happening when someone was on her back.

"She'd be a good polo pony all right," was the lieutenant's comment as he brought Betsy back to Helen. "She is handy and fast, just the type. One could raise some good polo mounts from her."

"Betsy may be doing that for us someday. Not just yet, though." The girl was pleased at the praise of her favorite.

George turned to Charlie. "You have a beautiful, well-schooled pony, boy. Someday you'll have to teach him to be less of a one-man horse. I'd do it soon."

"I never realized he was like that," Sunlight's master replied. "I just kept riding him, never thinking he would object to anyone else

being on his back. He surprised me."

"Well, the next time you and Helen go for a ride, change horses for the trip home. Sunny knows Helen," the polo player advised. "He'll probably be all right. Then Hank or your father or mother could take turns on him. You shouldn't have any real trouble with a sensible animal like Sunny. All he needs is a little explaining."

George Stevens' visit ended all too soon.

"I'll leave my 'leather pancake' with you. Use it. I'll send for it when I need it again."

"Thanks," Charlie replied. "I'll write to you often and tell you the news of my polo progress."

And Mr. Stevens said, "You've given me some new ideas. I think they are worth following. I haven't thought much about turning out polo ponies, though I know some horses I've raised were used back east for the game. Hard to find a piece of ground flat enough for a polo field out here. I suppose it would not need to be full size for training purposes."

"No, just long enough for a horse to get a good run," said George Stevens.

25

A Hunting Trip

"Now let's change horses," Charlie proposed to Helen as they started for home the first time the two youngsters were riding the range after George Stevens left. "We'll see how Sunny likes you on his back."

Helen did as her brother asked. Sunlight carried the girl readily enough. He didn't intend to let his master ride away from him. But he plainly showed that he didn't like the new arrangement. Usually he and Sundance were the best of friends. When turned out together they were inseparable. Now Sunny constantly nipped at the other horse. He even acted as if he would like to kick him. Helen tried to keep several yards distance between Sunny and Sundance but the former always edged his way to the side of the other horse.

"You're making a nuisance of yourself." Charlie was beginning to lose patience. "You will just have to get used to having someone else ride you once in a while."

Nevertheless he was pleased at his horse's devotion.

Finally after several weeks Sunlight would let any of the Stevens ride him without very definite objection as long as Charlie was there, too. With the shortening of the days and the coming of cold weather his master was content to let the matter rest at that.

"I thought we would make a pampered pet of that colt by raising him by hand. Looks to me as if that's just what we did," Mr. Stevens said to his wife. "We turned out a gentle horse all right, though maybe he won't be much use to anyone except Charlie."

"Let's wait and see about that," his wife answered. "I've faith in Sunny and the eastern way of working with horses. After all, he's not four years old yet. He shows as much sense as any horse we have."

The idea of playing polo took strong hold of Charlie's thoughts. He learned as much as he could of the game by reading. He studied the conformation of polo ponies. "I shouldn't call 'em ponies," he said. "Most of the really good ones are bigger than many of our cow ponies. Lots are thoroughbreds. Most of them are at least half

thoroughbred."

"They need that thoroughbred blood for speed," his father told the boy. "But the polo pony doesn't need the thoroughbred's very high spirit or his excitability. Horse and rider need cool heads and high courage for that game. Red Arrow is thoroughbred and most of his colts seem pretty sensible when they grow up. We may have something in this polo pony idea."

"I'll see what I can do about getting a training field ready, Dad," Charlie replied. "Let me have a team and a harrow next Saturday. I'll try to smooth down that piece of pasture where cousin George and I tried out the horse. Is it too late to sow it to grass?"

"I guess we will have to wait until spring for that. The harrow will level off some of the bumps but I guess that's about all you can do now."

Charlie harrowed and cross-harrowed the ground he had selected. There was already a fair covering of grass on the land and after he had rolled it, the field had a fair resemblance to a polo field. Rain came a few days following the boy's work so the grass had a chance to recover. Since he had little time to practice polo anyway, Charlie decided not to use his improvised field until spring, when he would get some grass seed from his father and sow and roll the ground again as soon as it became dry enough.

He was going over the field one Sunday in November after an early frost to see how well the grass had stood the harrowing, when Bert Weston rode up.

"Do you think anyone from Crescent Ranch might like to go up to the cabin with me over Thanksgiving?" he inquired. "We could get a deer for winter venison and maybe I might set a trap line if there is enough sign of fur animals in the mountains."

"I'd like to go if the folks would let me," Charlie eagerly answered. "Is there a shed for my horse up there? He's too good to turn out to rustle for himself in strange country."

"You mean that grand white-legged chestnut?" Bert replied. "Say, I wouldn't take him on a trip like that. There's likely to be rough going sometimes. We might even have a bad blizzard."

Charlie thought a minute. "I guess if I can take it, Sunny can. If Dad doesn't definitely say that I must leave him home, I'll take him along, and Sundance, too. Sundance can carry my bedding roll. Guess I'll take up a bag of oats."

"I'll pack up the oats," Bert Weston agreed. "My horses might like

some, too. But say, feller, how do you know your folks will let you go?"

Charlie's eager look vanished. "I don't," he said. "Let's go to the house and ask. You'll stay for dinner?"

"Yes. I expected to do that."

Mr. and Mrs. Stevens greeted their neighbor cordially. Could Charlie go up to the cabin with Bert Weston?

"We'll talk it over at dinner," they said.

Charlie could scarcely eat, he was so anxious to hear his parents' decision. But he wished even more their approval of his taking Sunlight with him. He knew that they would make no objection to Sundance going on the trip. He was a good horse, but there were scores of others just as fine out on the range. Sunlight was different. He was a horse in a thousand. Charlie felt, though, that he would almost rather not go if he couldn't ride Sunny. If his horse had a weathertight shed to stay in, and could be given oats, he didn't see how the trip could harm him. Finally the boy could wait no longer.

"How about it, Dad?" he asked.

The ranchman turned to Bert. "He'll be very much in your way. He's a lazy youngster. Won't even make his own bunk. Sure you want him along?"

Bert smiled. He knew well that Charlie was anything but lazy and could look after himself anywhere.

Mr. Stevens continued, a twinkle in his eye, "You know that horse of his? I think you had better arrange to take him into the cabin with you, especially at night."

Charlie read permission in his father's words. It was settled then! He could go with Bert and he could ride Sunny!

A light snow covered the ground when Bert started from his ranch the Wednesday morning before Thanksgiving. He rode a strong white horse named Cappy and had three pack horses with him, each carrying about a hundred pounds. This was not a heavy load, but dead weight tires a horse more quickly than a man does. Bert had plenty of pack horses. He loaded lightly so that if anything happened to any one horse he could distribute his load among the others and not overburden them.

Charlie was up long before daylight that November morning. The first thing he did was to look after his beloved horses. Each was

given all the oats he thought was good for him. The boy had made ready the packsaddle for Sundance the day before. And when he went back to the house he found his mother getting breakfast for him.

"Mother," Charlie said. "You shouldn't have gotten up. I could have easily rustled up breakfast for myself."

Mrs. Stevens smiled. "Maybe the one I cook might be a little better."

Soon she had a hearty ranch breakfast of coffee, flapjacks, and bacon ready for her son. Mr. Stevens and Helen appeared. The whole family was up to see Charlie off.

"You have plenty of time, son," the ranchman said. "You might have had an hour more of sleep."

"But I couldn't sleep," Charlie answered.

The sun rose as breakfast was finished. The day promised to be clear and crisply cool with a moderate wind blowing. It was an ideal day for traveling.

Charlie donned his warmest winter riding clothes, heavy woolen breeches, high leather boots with thick socks, red-checked woolen shirt, leather jacket, and fleece-lined coat.

"It's hard to find the boy," Helen said, laughing, when Charlie appeared with all his clothing.

His father took a light sporting rifle from the gun rack, a 25–20 caliber, powerful enough for deer. "We won't let you go hunting with a twenty-two this time," he said. "Now let's look over the packsaddle and load for Sundance. Bert will be along soon."

Patient Sundance submitted willingly to carrying a pack. He had been so used to doing any kind of task a horse might have to perform that he took the packing philosophically. The bedding roll and some supplies made a light load. Then Charlie saddled Sunny.

Soon Bert Weston arrived. Bert was a stocky, strong man of about forty. All his life had been spent in the ranch country. His chief interest lay in his guiding and hunting. He ran a couple of hundred head of cattle. He also raised a few horses, mostly heavier draft stock.

"They are so much easier to handle than your saddle horses," he said to the men who were inclined to scoff at the quieter work animals. "And you need 'em just as much."

"You mean you wouldn't know how to break them," the cowboys said.

"Well, I won't argue about that," Bert replied. "I could always hire one of you fellows to risk his fool neck breaking them."

At that the cowboys let the matter drop.

Mrs. Stevens had a hot cup of coffee ready for Bert. "Just to get you off right," she said.

Now they were off!

"You ride up front there, Charlie," Bert said. "I'll trail along here at the tail of the bunch 'til we get 'em strung along. Then they'll follow like Mary's little lamb. Hey, you! Get around there!" he ordered a sturdy black pack horse as he tried to turn back into the Stevens' yard.

"So long, thanks for the coffee," he called.

Charlie waved a last goodbye as he rode out of sight around a turn in the road.

"I wish I could go on a trip like that," Helen said wistfully. "Girls can't have half as much fun as boys."

"We'll go on a trip someday, Sis," her father promised. "Maybe next summer."

As the sun rose higher the boy removed his warm fleece coat and tied it on his saddle. Sunlight tossed and pranced. He longed for a good leg-stretching run in the snow. This slow plodding of the pack train was new to him. Charlie, too, would have liked to have felt that swinging lope and the wind in his face. But he knew that Bert would not have asked him to come on this trip with him if he were the kind of boy who would go galloping off from a pack train.

Steadily the pack horses plodded ahead at a speed of three or four miles an hour. There were nearly twenty-five miles to go. An all day's trip. Now the good sense of lightly loading the pack horses showed itself. Bert could push them along today even when the trail became steep. Good horseman that he was, he would have felt like sparing them had they been carrying heavier burdens.

He and Charlie often dismounted and walked beside their mounts. In that way they not only made the trip easier for Sunlight and Cappy but had a change themselves from the monotony of slow riding. And the walking kept them warm, for as they rode into the mountains the air became colder with an increasing wind.

Charlie was tempted to switch Sundance's pack to Sunny, but Bert advised, "Leave well enough alone. You can't tell what that young horse of yours will do under a pack. He may try to scatter it all over the landscape."

Both Bert and Charlie constantly kept a sharp lookout for signs of wild animals. They saw several deer bounding off in the distance. They crossed trails of deer, elk, black bears, and numerous smaller animals, but never a sign of a gray wolf.

"I wonder where that lone wolf I shot last summer came from?" Charlie said.

"That's hard to tell. Sometimes a stray wild animal will turn up unexpectedly long after they seem to have been exterminated," Bert replied. "We'll look for their tracks and perhaps we may hear them howl at night. But I doubt if there are any gray wolves even up here in the mountains."

The afternoon was well advanced when finally Bert and Charlie reached the cabin. The boy's first thought was for Sunlight's stable. Bert suspected as much and waved his hand toward a well-built log shed with a tar paper roof.

"Is that okay?" he asked. Then he fetched a tarpaulin from the cabin. "Hang this over the door. Your horses ought to be snug and comfortable in there."

Charlie showed his surprise. Were both Sunlight and Sundance to be under cover? He had not liked to ask for a stable for Sundance since Bert was leaving his own horses in the open. The latter saw the boy's surprise.

"You and your horses are guests. As long as there is room for two, you may as well put both in there. They will keep each other warm. My animals are used to being out in all kinds of weather."

The truth was that the log shed was Cappy's. Bert knew better than to put two strange horses in it together, so he turned the white horse out with the pack string. The weather was not yet cold enough to cause discomfort to the thickly-coated Cappy.

"Charlie, you take care of your horses," Bert said. "I'll do the unpacking. Then if you'll start a fire in the cabin we'll soon be comfortable."

26

In the Cabin

"We'll need a good fire all right," Charlie said as he entered the neat, snug log building. Like everything of Bert Weston's it was a good, workman-like structure about twelve by eighteen feet in size. A big stone fireplace, built in, was the chief feature of the cabin. Four bunks at each end were the sleeping accommodations. A table made of hewn pine boards and four chairs of similar construction completed the furniture. Two windows, barred with heavy iron on the outside, let in light, and opened out on a view extending over hundreds of square miles of territory.

Charlie was completely happy at the prospect of spending a few days in these splendid surroundings.

"I won't care if I don't get a deer," he told himself. "Just to ride Sunny through these wonderful snow-covered mountains is enough for me."

No meal ever tasted better than the one Bert cooked that night. He had brought a big steak, which he broiled over the open fire. Charlie had boiled some potatoes in a kettle hung from one of the hooks fastened in the chimney for the purpose. Coffee was brewed in melted snow water in a pot suspended from a second hook. Mrs. Stevens had baked bread purposely for the trip. Canned fruit served for dessert.

"You'd better pack a couple of pails full of snow and melt it for your horses. That is, unless you want to lug their water from the spring. It's quite a carry. My horses will eat snow. Drinking water is the weak spot in an otherwise ideal camp site. We have to climb about two hundred yards to get it. I couldn't put the cabin nearer because the ground is too darned rough."

Charlie followed Bert's suggestion. The horses had drunk from a running stream on the way up. Sundance and Sunlight would want more water before morning.

Drowsiness overcame both man and boy soon after the meal was cleared away. Charlie roused himself. "I guess I'll look at my horses and turn in," he said. Then he saw that Bert had fallen sound asleep

in the warmth of the log fire. He awoke at the boy's voice.

"Eh! Yeah, I guess I'll do the same," he yawned. "Gosh! I hate to go out in the cold."

The two donned their fleece jackets and went out into the snow. Sunlight and Sundance whinnied softly as Charlie pushed aside the tarpaulin and entered the shed. As Bert had predicted, it was comfortably warm in the shed.

"Where did the hay come from?" he asked in surprise.

"Oh, I got in a little last summer just for Cappy when I keep him here. I have to guard it from the deer, though," Bert answered.

Charlie hadn't noticed a small haystack behind the cabin with a high log fence around it to keep the deer away. They would have raided the stack when the place was unoccupied if the hay had been left unprotected.

Bert's horses were standing close together in a sheltered spot. They had found enough feed and browse and seemed quite content.

"Don't they ever think about going home?" Charlie asked.

"Yes, they have played that trick on me sometimes," Bert answered. "Cappy will hold them, though. He's a wise horse. I like to have a white horse like him in the string. Makes 'em easy to find when there's no snow. Somehow I think horses follow a white horse more readily than a darker colored horse. Maybe I only imagine that, but anyway I always put a bell, when I use one, on the lightest colored animal in my string."

Charlie, entirely satisfied about the welfare of Sunny and Sundance, slept so soundly that dawn came before he even realized he had been asleep. Bert grinned at him from his bunk on the opposite side of the cabin.

"There's nothing much to get up for," he said. "I'm just going to loaf today, and look around. If I get my deer, I know just about where to go for what I want. No record-breaking antlers on a tough old buck. When I'm out for venison I look for a plump two-year-old or even a large yearling spike-buck. Their meat's much better eating than old ones."

"Just the way it is with beef," Charlie answered.

At the sound of their master's voice, Sunlight and Sundance whinnied.

Bert smiled. "Oh, I forgot your horses. Sure, look after them. But me, maybe I'll have breakfast in bed." And he rolled over, face to the wall. "Bring in some more snow," he added as Charlie closed the

door.

"That boy's the right sort," Bert said to himself. "Well, Cappy'll be looking for me, too. Or maybe just his oats!" He threw off the blankets and got up. He had only been joking with Charlie.

The boy fed Sunlight and Sundance. Then he heard a horse whinny down on the mountainside. Cappy had seen that the occupants of the cabin were astir. He came plodding up the trail, the pack horses stringing along behind him. Bert gave all of them a couple of quarts of oats, pouring it on the snow for them. He tied Cappy. "I'll want you later, old boy."

Chores around the cabin took an hour or so. Bert had brought up a quantity of winter supplies, to have them in the cabin before the deepening snow made the going harder for his horses. The supplies must be stored where mice couldn't reach them. There were rodent-proof bins in the rafters for just that purpose. Finally everything was arranged to Bert's satisfaction. He and Charlie rode off. "Bring your little gun," he told the boy. "We'll try for a couple of grouse for supper."

Bert knew the mountains. Every ravine, every stand of pine or spruce brought a memory. He was one of those guides who believed in knowing a limited region thoroughly, rather than to have a sketchy idea of a vast territory. He seemed certain of where he could find a deer, a bear, or grouse when he wanted them.

"The only thing I can't be certain of is whether it will be a buck with big antlers. And sometimes I'll find a she-bear with cubs by mistake. When he is with me no dude shoots a she-bear. But I can't always tell. The cubs may not be in sight. We'll find some grouse over in those pines. No use of shooting them yet. We will just have to carry 'em around." Just as Bert had predicted, four grouse flew into the trees at the riders' approach. They perched in the branches as Charlie and Bert passed.

"I could have picked off those birds easily," said Charlie. "Haven't they brains enough to beat it while they can?"

"I'm afraid they won't learn until it's too late. You would have had no trouble shooting at least two of those grouse. They just haven't sufficient sense of fear for their own good."

Charlie and Bert rambled around for about two hours and then headed back for the cabin.

"There are our two deer," Bert said in a low voice. He pointed to twin, parallel trails leading down the mountainside to a growth of

small spruce. With his field glasses he examined carefully the area he indicated for several minutes. “See them, near the base of that dead pine? They are watching us. Two young bucks. If we don’t bother them now I can get them tomorrow. I’d shoot them today but I don’t feel like dressing them and packing them to the cabin. Just don’t feel like hard work today. And I can’t let them freeze until we’ve dressed them. Let’s start back.... Now we’ll find our two grouse. There are always a few on this slope.”

Soon a bird flushed and flew into the spruce a hundred yards ahead.

“We’ll take that one,” Bert said. “Ride on ahead and shoot its head off.”

Charlie was a good shot and Sunlight was used to firearms. Still the boy was none too sure he could hit the grouse’s head. But he knew that if he shot the bird through the body much of the meat would be worthless. If he might dismount and rest his rifle against a tree he knew he could hit his mark. Bert expected him to shoot from the saddle.

“Well, here goes,” Charlie said to himself. He raised the rifle to his shoulder, took aim for a second and fired.

“Number one,” said Bert. He rode over to the dead bird, picked it up without dismounting and tied it to his saddle. “Now for another.”

Two more grouse flushed but didn’t wait to be shot. “Maybe they’re getting some sense,” Bert said dryly. “There must be one more foolish bird in these parts. One more, that’s all we need.”

And sure enough. The hunters found the second bird. Charlie’s shot was again successful. He was beginning to be a little proud of himself.

“No one could call you a game hog,” said Charlie as Bert picked up the last bird.

“There’s a shortcut up ahead that will save our horses a hard climb. How’s your horse on a narrow trail? The one we are coming to is safe enough but there’s no room for funny work. We have to work along a ledge about a yard wide for fifty feet. Think your Sunny can do it?”

“Well, we can try. But say, if there’s snow on it, I’m for taking the hard climb,” Charlie replied.

“There will be no snow on it. That ledge has a southern exposure.”

When Charlie saw the trail he thought that if he were alone he would prefer to take the longer way home. The ledge was level enough, but a yard was a generous estimate of its width. Sheer rock formed its upper side and the slope below was so steep that were a horse to make a misstep he would roll for several hundred yards. But Bert seemed quite sure of its safety and old Cappy certainly had no misgivings. That good horse walked along the ledge just as if it were a wide road. Sunny, too, stepped right along. Neither rider attempted to guide his mount. They knew well that the horses were just as anxious as they to traverse that ledge safely.

They had gone about two thirds of the distance to be traveled before the ledge widened again. Suddenly Cappy stopped. So did Sunny. Bert held up his hand as he rounded a turn in the ledge.

"Tree down."

A six-inch pine had toppled from the upper slope and lay athwart the narrow trail. Very carefully Bert dismounted with hardly an inch to spare. The steady Cappy stood like a rock. He knew his master was in a tight place.

"You stay where you are," Bert called to Charlie. "That colt of yours may get panicky. I'll see if I can push the tree over."

Charlie thought that to stay in the saddle was good advice. Sunny did not appear to be excited. He seemed to be taking his cue from the calm horse in front of him.

"Do you think both of us could clear the trail?" Charlie asked. "My horse seems quiet enough. I guess I could get down."

Bert thought for a minute. He was responsible for the boy's safety. Once off his horse he was in no real danger. He and Charlie could retrace their steps but the horses simply had no room to turn around. They just couldn't do it where they were on that narrow ledge.

"All right," Bert shouted back. "Be mighty careful. I'd sure like to move this tree."

He held his breath while Charlie dismounted. One false move on the horse's part would mean almost certain death. Sunny stood stock still while his master swung his leg over the cantle. Then, even before the boy brought his foot down on the ledge, the intelligent horse edged in until he stood as close to the cliff as he could get, giving Charlie all the room possible.

Bert was watching with his heart in his throat. Now his eyes opened wide in wonder. "And I thought that chestnut would get

panicky! He's got more sense than I have. I haven't been over this trail in a year. I should have looked first before we tried it."

As Charlie started toward him, he directed, "Go between Cappy and the cliff. He'll give you some room."

And sure enough. That good horse stood on the edge of the ledge while Charlie passed him.

The tree was too heavy for even the combined strength of the two hunters.

"I'll just have to foot it back to the cabin for an axe," Bert finally decided. "It will take me over two hours for the round trip. I'm not going to try to climb over this fallen tree, even though I'd save time. Take care of the horses."

Cappy stood out on the edge again to let the two pass. But when Bert came in front of Sunny that horse stood squarely in his way.

"Hey! Let me pass," ordered Bert, trying to push in between Sunlight and the face of the cliff. Sunlight pressed in just tight enough so that the man could not get through. Bert turned to Charlie.

"Come, take care of your horse!" he said.

But Charlie needed to do nothing. Very gingerly Sunlight commenced to back. Cappy looked around and began to do the same.

Bert stood in amazement until his good horse nearly backed into him. Then he came to. Sunny and Cappy continued to back until they reached a space wide enough for them to turn. Then their masters mounted.

"Charlie," Bert said as they rode toward the cabin. "If I had a horse like yours, there wouldn't be money enough in the world to make me sell him."

"You don't think I'd sell Sunny for any price, do you?" Charlie indignantly demanded.

27

Sunny Disgraces Himself

The second night in the cabin passed much as did the first. Charlie felt that he would like to live forever like this. Bert cooked the grouse to perfection. The supply of Mrs. Stevens' fine bread still held out. Even the canned fruit was beyond praise. The sandwiches Charlie and Bert had munched at noon left them with a grand appetite for the evening meal.

"We'll get our deer tomorrow," Bert promised as he rolled up in his blanket.

"I'll ride Sundance, then," Charlie replied as he dropped off to sleep.

Bert and Charlie were off early next day. Sunny was left behind in the shed. Charlie placed bars across the front of it, taking down the tarpaulin.

"You'll be comfortable in here with the sun pouring in," the boy said to his horse as he mounted Sundance and followed Bert.

Sunny watched until they disappeared. Then he cleaned up the few oats that had spilled on the ground and philosophically began munching hay. He seemed contented enough to have a day of rest, even if he was left alone. Bert's pack horses were feeding in the snow within view. Sunny had no particular desire to join them but they kept him from feeling lonely. The sun's rays felt good on his coat. He dozed on his feet, completely relaxed. An hour or so passed.

Meanwhile Bert and Charlie were riding leisurely toward the place where they had spotted the deer yesterday.

"No need to hurry," Bert said. "There's never any need to hurry up here. That's what I like about it. If anything is happening, it's happening, and you can't do much about it. We'll give those young bucks time to get settled. Then we'll just look 'em up and shoot them. One apiece, and that's all I'm going to take out of these mountains this year."

Charlie thought with mixed feelings of shooting his deer. Since he was on a hunting trip he intended to hunt. But he said to himself that he'd not be sorry if he missed his buck. Anyway he wasn't

planning to miss on purpose, not after his two perfect shots at those grouse.

"We'll leave our horses here," Bert said when he and Charlie reached a point several hundred yards from the bucks' usual haunts. "Wind is about right. Let's go on foot to the place from which we spied the bucks yesterday. We'll try to spot them with the glasses. If we see them and it's not too long a shot we'll kill 'em right in their beds."

"Doesn't sound very sporting, does it?" said Charlie.

Bert looked surprised. "Sporting? Oh! I see what you mean. Start 'em running and give 'em a chance for their life. Say, I stopped thinking that way years ago. If you're going to kill a creature, get as close to it as you can, and get as clear a shot as you can, and get it when it's not moving. You wound too many animals when you do anything else."

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What about Sunny in the meantime?

After his little nap in the sunshine he began to feel restless. He finished all the hay. He couldn't find another single oat. The next thing he did was to commence playing with the bars across the front of his shed. None were very firm. They had merely been slipped through iron loops. It was no trick at all for him to slide out the top bar, letting one end of it drop to the ground. He stepped over the remaining two, and was free.

First Sunny trotted down to the pack horses. They weren't very interesting to him and there was no sign of Sundance among them. Charlie seemed to be nowhere around, so Sunny came back to the cabin. On the way he crossed Sundance's trail together with Cappy's. That was enough for him. Wherever Sundance was, there Charlie must be. Sunlight took up the trail. Trotting or loping he made much better time than Bert and Charlie in their leisurely riding.

-

The two hunters reached their stand. Bert's practiced eye discerned the bucks. He showed them to Charlie.

"We can get closer by going down behind that ridge. Be careful of noise."

"This is fine," Bert announced a minute later. "Good, clear shots.

You take the buck on the left. I'll shoot the other." Both hunters leveled their rifles and lined their sights.

Then a horse's neigh broke the stillness. The deer jumped from their beds. Bert shot and got his buck but Charlie never pulled trigger.

"That's Sunny!" he shouted, leaping to his feet. Again the neigh rang through the mountains, answered by Sundance.

"Could anything have happened at camp?" Charlie turned in alarm to Bert.

"You ride back and see. I'll pack in this buck on Cappy."

Charlie rode Sundance back to the cabin. Sunlight followed.

Naturally he found things as they had been left.

"You spoiled my deer hunt, Sunny," Charlie said when he reached the cabin. "I guess the next time I leave you home I'll have to tie you. Well, I don't care much. Bert got his deer and that satisfies me."

28

Sunny Is Challenged

In about an hour Bert returned with his buck, tied behind his saddle. Cappy made no objection to carrying both man and deer.

"Want to try for another buck tomorrow?" Bert asked good-naturedly. "I know where there ought to be others."

"I think I'd be just as satisfied if I didn't. It seems I don't particularly want to shoot a deer. Thanks just the same," Charlie responded. "The family like venison well enough. One of us usually manages to get a deer, or we are given one. I'd like simply to ride around the way we did Thanksgiving. It's great up here."

"That's all right with me," agreed Bert. "We'll take a few grouse home to your folks. I'll give them a haunch of venison."

On Sunday Bert closed the cabin. "I'll probably be back in about two weeks to do some trapping. There seem to be enough fur bearers around to make it worthwhile. I'll just bring up Cappy and a pack horse. There won't be feed for more."

Charlie and Bert reached the Crescent Ranch early in the afternoon. The pack train made better time on the home trip, as horses usually do.

"We had a great time," Charlie announced.

"Where's your deer?" his father asked.

"He's still up there. I almost got him." Then Charlie told the story of how Sunny came into the picture at just the wrong moment.

Winter settled down in earnest over the valley of the Clearwater soon after Charlie's return from the hunting trip. The snow was much deeper than usual and the cold more intense. Mr. Stevens had to haul hay to his mares. It took four horses to get the loaded wagon through the snow. He found he needed another team for the task. It was typical of Bert Weston and of ranch custom for him to bring over a pair of strong work horses. Mr. Stevens offered to buy them or at least to rent them for the winter.

"No," said Bert. "They are only eating up my feed and doing me no good. You can use 'em. Keep them as long as you wish. You don't need another team badly enough to feed 'em the year round."

"I guess you are right there, Bert," Mr. Stevens agreed. "Well, I'll do as much for you some time."

With the wagon road open to the pasture Charlie rode Sunlight out to look over the broodmares and to study the yearlings and the older stock, whenever he had time. Polo ponies were always in his mind and he pictured to himself the type of horse he would like to see the Crescent Ranch produce. He decided to ask his father to set aside a half dozen of the mares which came nearest to polo pony type, and let him take care of them himself. He wanted to give them extra feeding, start to train their foals early, and give mares and foals hay and grain throughout the winter. His success with Sunlight had convinced him that he could produce fine stock. He knew Arrow was good enough to breed excellent polo mounts if the mares also were of equal quality.

"That will all cost money," Mr. Stevens said. "But I'm willing to take a chance. We'll sow more grass in the spring. I'll have to make more hay."

Spring came, and with the lengthening days Charlie began polo practice again. Hank found an old English saddle somewhere. He and Charlie spent many of their spare hours whacking the polo balls around. They managed to get a fairly good turf on their improvised field. Rather than cut the grass Charlie tried letting the two milk cows and picketed horses eat it off. That worked after a fashion. But he found it necessary to roll the field every few weeks. It fell far short of the smooth perfection of a real polo field. But the boys learned how to handle their mallets and to send a ball flying. And the horses, too, learned what was expected of them. Sunlight especially got to know the proper distance he should keep away from the ball so that Charlie could get in a good stroke.

During the winter George Stevens had sent a quantity of assorted polo material to his cousins. These included several serviceable pairs of leg boots for the horses. Sometimes the boot on the right leg might not match that on the left but that didn't affect the protection given.

Sunlight was developing into a marvelously fast polo pony with such a natural aptitude for the game that he could almost play it himself.

Of course, Charlie went out again on the spring round-up. And of course, Sunny went with him. Now that the horse was full-grown nothing on the range could match his speed. Many cowboys who

thought they rode fast horses laid bets with the Crescent Ranch men that they could beat Sunlight. That never happened. Charlie had a tantalizing habit of letting his horse run just fast enough to stay about a length ahead of the other. Naturally it wasn't long before every rider around Crescent Ranch knew what Charlie was doing. But some newcomer with deep faith in the speed of his mount would challenge Charlie. Usually there was some rider from the Cartwheel Ranch or the Crescent Ranch to egg him on. The boy generally said little. The conversation would proceed about like this. A Cartwheel man would say, "Think you own a fast horse, eh? Well, that white-legged chestnut with the light mane and tail you see over there doesn't run. He flies!"

The stranger would saunter over toward Sunny to examine him. "Good horse all right. But he ought to be in a circus. What do you mean 'he can't run; he flies?' If you want to look at a real horse, cast your eyes on that gray of mine. He's half thoroughbred and is just a streak of light when he runs."

Then perhaps a Crescent rider would join in the talk. "Well, there's a horse that came within a few feet of beating the chestnut." He'd point to a nondescript brown which really was fast despite unpromising appearance.

The newcomer would think then, "If this horse they are all talking about can't do more than just beat out that brown, I ought to be able to run away from him."

The race would be arranged. Charlie would do as usual and the home boys would collect their bets. Sunlight remained unbeaten. Charlie didn't realize it, but he was teaching Sunlight one of the hardest things to train a horse to do, to race beside another horse yet keep some speed in reserve. And that is particularly valuable in a polo pony. Then one day a man rode into camp leading two horses. He was a little man who might weigh around a hundred and ten pounds. On one of the led horses there was a saddle such as Charlie had never seen before. It was little more than a properly shaped piece of leather with stirrups and a girth attached to it. Every ounce of weight that it was possible to eliminate had been dispensed with. And the horse that carried it stood sixteen hands and two inches high. He, too, was a chestnut, but with no touch of white anywhere. He held his finely chiseled, small head proudly, and his large eyes had an expression of courage and unfailing spirit. The second led horse carried a miscellaneous assortment of bedding-roll, oats, light

camping equipment, and odds and ends, all covered by a tarpaulin.

It was at the end of the day's work when the stranger arrived. The cook called to him, "Have some chow? There's still some left."

"Thanks. Sure thing," the newcomer answered. "Just let me anchor this 'orse."

He took a stake and rope from the pack and picketed his chestnut horse, and then took off the light saddle. He unloaded his pack horse and unsaddled the one he rode but left them standing, western fashion, rope and reins trailing on the ground.

Both the picketed horse and the strange kind of saddle were objects of close scrutiny to the cowhands, even more so than the little man who owned them. They waited until he had finished eating before they began their questions. But the little man wasn't ready to talk.

Charlie, of course, was as curious about the newcomer as were the others. But his real interest lay in the big chestnut horse. Unless he was greatly mistaken this horse had speed, great speed. From delicately pointed ears to long, slender, springy pasterns, every line showed it. Weight in this horse was minimized where it wasn't needed, as indicated by the small, fine head and long, slim neck. But his shoulders were powerful and his chest deep, with a good width between his forelegs. The full curve of his ribs gave him great lung capacity for endurance. Here was a horse for a long race. His straight, short back was strong, but the greatest strength centered in the powerful hindquarters. These were slightly higher in proportion than those of even the best cow ponies, and they were tremendously muscled. Irresistible driving force was in those muscles. And then the slender, long legs with their steel-hard, clean-cut tendons and bulging muscles!

Here was a thoroughbred!

Charlie studied him. He knew that if this horse and Sunlight were ever raced together, Sunlight would have to give of his utmost.

Though the cowboys plied him with questions, the stranger evaded direct answers. It's not etiquette on the range to press a point as to where a man hails from or about his destination. "Mind your own business," is the motto out there. The stranger seemed honest enough but he simply wasn't giving out information about himself.

"Taking 'im from 'ere to there," he answered the question about what he was doing with the big horse. "Sure, 'e can run. 'E's chained

lightning. Nothing out 'ere as can match 'im."

Charlie sensed a challenge in that last sentence but said nothing. He had never before seen a horse whose every move so indicated speed. Arrow, the stallion at home, was a thoroughbred, but he was a horse long out of training, rather too heavy in flesh, and without the great muscular development of this stranger's horse.

The newcomer, of course, had noticed Sunlight. That horse stood out from the other cow horses so that one couldn't miss him. The stranger knew horses and saw at a glance that Charlie's favorite had speed. There wasn't a man among the range riders who would not have liked to see a race between Sunlight and the thoroughbred.

"Say, stranger. What do you call your horse?" one of them asked.

"Sultan's 's name. 'E 'ad a fancier one than that when I got 'im. But now 'e answers to Sultan," was the answer.

It was taken for granted that the stranger and his horses would share the campgrounds for the night. No one even thought to invite the little man to stay. When the cowhands spread out their bedding rolls he did the same. But many a cowhand "sat up in bed" when they saw the stranger blanket his horse with the tarpaulin that had covered the pack, and strap it on him. They had not seen before that it was fitted with buckles and straps where they were necessary.

Charlie lay awake long after the others were sleeping soundly. Here he well knew was a horse whose speed would put Sunlight's to a real test. He knew without being told that the stranger was an ex-jockey, perhaps now a little overweight since he was a man of middle age. Or he might have been barred from racing for some infringement of rules.

No one had mentioned a race, which was quite unlike the usual custom when a strange range rider arrived with a likely looking horse. The cowboys knew range horses and what might be expected of them. But this big thoroughbred was a horse outside of their experience.

At last Charlie fell asleep, but he dreamed all night of Sunlight's racing Sultan. Next morning the men seemed to delay going about their duties. All watched the stranger while he groomed and polished the thoroughbred, whistling to him under his breath as he worked. Presently he went to Henry Stevens and asked permission to use his forge, saying that his horse needed new shoes.

"I'm sorry," the cattleman replied. "The wagons will be moving on in just a few minutes. If you want to trail along you're welcome to

use our forge this afternoon. We'll probably have some work to do on our own horses. It's only a ten mile trip to the next camp."

"Thank you, sir," the little man said. "I guess I'd better do that."

"You take wonderful care of your big horse. Nothing rough and ready about the way you treat him," Henry Stevens then said.

"He's been used to better than that," answered the stranger.

The riders were surprised to find the ex-jockey still in camp when they came in at noon. He was busy shoeing his big horse. One of the riders examined a horseshoe. It was so much lighter than those the cow ponies wore that it seemed the thoroughbred would have to be shod very often. The cowhand struck the horseshoe against his boot heel. It rang almost like a bell. "Tempered steel!" he exclaimed. "I'll have to get me some of those when I strike it rich."

Charlie had been watching the shoeing.

"How much faster do those lightweight shoes make a horse?" he asked.

"That's 'ard to say," the stranger replied. "But enough to cut a second or so off a mile."

So races were matters of seconds. Off here on the range they counted miles in minutes, two minutes maybe for a fast running horse.

One rider could stand it no longer. "Say, stranger," he drawled. "How fast can your horse run?"

The ex-jockey looked around. He saw that every cowhand was awaiting his answer. He saw, too, that many eyes were turned toward Sunny.

"Well," he answered, "I just wouldn't know. It's so long since I've 'ad 'im on a good track over a measured mile." Then he came to the point. "'Ow fast can that 'andsome animal over there make it?"

Charlie was all attention but he said nothing. He was thinking. He knew right well he couldn't match Sunlight, carrying a fifty pound stock saddle, against the big race horse with his saddle weighing only a few pounds. Why, he himself would outweigh the little man by thirty pounds anyway. The boy had grown rapidly the last year making up for lost time. He had won every brush he had been in with Sunny. But they had all been impromptu matches, one horse against another just as they stood, with some tree or rock as a goal.

Here was a different situation. He knew the stranger intended his last question as a challenge. Should he accept?

Charlie went over to Sunlight. He intended to ride him this afternoon. But he decided to use another horse. He caught and saddled one from the remuda and then drove the cow ponies out to graze.

Meanwhile Henry Stevens had been watching the expert way the ex-jockey had shod his horse. He said, "Our blacksmith wants to quit. He injured his back and it bothers him. Do you want a job? You'll have to do a few other things beside shoeing horses but that will be your chief job."

"Yes, sir," the little man replied. "Could you include some oats in my wages?" He grinned as he said this. "The Sultan over there loses weight fast on a grass diet."

Henry Steven smiled when he replied, "I guess we could spare some. By the way, what's your name?"

"Jones, sir," the stranger answered.

29

Sunny Runs a Real Race

Of course with Jones and his thoroughbred in camp permanently the question of a race between Sultan and Sunlight was in every mind. Jones was canny. He wanted to collect some bets, and he knew that the cowhands would not throw their money away, no matter how loyal they might feel toward Sunny.

Charlie thought, "I could ride bareback and save Sunny fifty pounds. But I can't shrink myself enough to get down to Jones' weight. I suspect Sultan is not as young as he used to be and has likely lost a few seconds of speed. But he's three inches taller than my horse. He's in prime condition, and from his appearance I'd judge him to be as game as they come.... Jones would be a crack-jack driver, too, even if we laugh at his style."

Now Charlie took to using other horses all the time when he had work to do. The trip from camp to camp was all the exercise Sunny got. That was sufficient to keep him fit, and since the thoroughbred got exactly the same amount of traveling the score was even on that point. The fact that Charlie had stopped working Sunlight wasn't overlooked by Jones. He wasn't working his horse anyway.

At last the matter had to be settled. It was Hank who arranged the race. He reached the limit of his patience one day at the noon meal.

"Charlie," he said when Jones was also present, "I'm hankering to know if Sunny can beat Sultan. Why don't you race him? You know you've been planning it for ten days."

Jones grinned. This was his opening. "Lad," he said. "I'll race anything. And I like to play fair. But I'm afraid your 'orse is licked before he starts. Carries too much weight. There's twenty-five or thirty pounds difference between us, not to say anything of your saddle."

"I'll ride bareback," Charlie announced.

"That's no way to race," the jockey objected. "Can't 'elp your 'orse any. 'E wants your weight forward, up over 'is shoulders, not bearing on 'is back muscles, hampering his stride."

This was a new one to Charlie. He began to see there was much

more to racing than just sending your horse along as fast as you could.

Then Jones continued. "Well, if you think you can race bareback it's all right with me. But about this weight business. If 'twas just a few pounds, even eight or ten, I could manage to even things up by strapping some weights to the saddle or around my waist. But twenty-five is too much."

"Aw!" one of the cowhands spoke up. "Race anyway. Give him a head start if you want to be particular."

"Oh, but it can't be done that way, you know. No one's ever timed the boy's 'orse," Jones answered.

"I give up," said the cowboy.

Finally the time was set for a Saturday afternoon. Arrangements were made that the race would start from a certain rock which Jones agreed was about a mile away. He insisted that a straight course be marked from the rock to a point near the camp. Then he asked half a dozen men to ride to the rock and as carefully as possible examine the course for gopher holes or anything that might throw a horse.

"He's mighty particular," said the cowhands to each other.

Then Jones asked one rider to station himself at a spot which he judged to be a quarter mile from the starting point, another at the half mile, and the third at the three quarter mile.

"Will you act as judge, sir?" he asked his boss. "Here's my stopwatch." Jones handed Henry Stevens a battered timepiece which was unquestionably a fine instrument.

Then Jones tried to obtain some bets. But the cowboys were skeptical. They might bet among themselves, collecting or paying their bets on payday, but Jones had just come on the range. Even when he showed two one hundred dollar bills he could find no one to risk his money. There was something professional in his manner that was strange to the cowboys.

"All right," he said cheerfully, "the race is for the sport of the thing."

Everything was set at last to Jones' satisfaction. Charlie vaulted on Sunny's back and headed for the starting point. Then he saw that Jones was leading the thoroughbred.

"Save your 'orse for the race, lad," he called.

Charlie hadn't thought of that. He never even considered for an instant that for Sunlight just to carry him a mile might clip a

fraction of a second from his time.

A cowhand nearby gave Charlie his horse. Following Jones' example the boy traversed the distance at a walk, leading Sunny. The latter took very little interest in all the proceedings, but the thoroughbred knew what it was all about and showed keen excitement. This was the thing for which he was bred.

It seemed to those watching from the camp that Sunlight and Sultan took hours to reach the starting point. It did take them twelve or fifteen minutes. But at last they got there.

Charlie vaulted on Sunlight's back. Jones stood beside his restive big horse. The stirrups were only a little below the level of his chin. He looked around rather sheepishly. "Gimme a leg up, somebody," he asked.

Jeff, the night rider, lifted the little man into his saddle.

"All set?" he called to Charlie. Sunlight was standing quietly, alert and watchful, but without the least idea of what was going to happen. Every other time he had raced it had been a matter of "Let's go" and he would be off with another horse galloping beside him.

"I'm ready," Charlie answered.

"Your 'orse isn't," said Jones.

"He's ready, too, only he doesn't show it. Come on."

Jones brought the thoroughbred even with Sunlight.

"Ready, Charlie?"

"Yes."

Jones nodded to Jeff. Jeff fired his revolver into the air. The thoroughbred shot forward in a tremendous bound. He gained a half length on Sunlight at once.

Sunny leaped into his stride, increasing speed as he gained momentum. Sultan was a half length in the lead due to that first great impetus of pent-up energy. Running his utmost, he was unable to increase his lead. At the quarter mile Sunny's nose was even with Sultan's saddle girth. Hank watched the flying horses flash by. At the half mile their relative positions had scarcely changed. But at the three quarter mark Sunny's nose had reached the thoroughbred's shoulder.

Sunlight was running as he had never run before. His white legs flashed so fast that they seemed just a haze to the eye. His cream colored mane and tail streamed back as he raced. He was beautiful. The thoroughbred ran smoothly in long rhythmic strides. Jones was a tiny figure on his great back, riding far forward over the

withers.

The intent cowhands were silent as the two horses neared the finish line. Henry Stevens crouched, stopwatch in his hand, watching those straining heads. It was to be a close finish.

Inch by inch Sunny's nose reached past Sultan's shoulders, then past his neck, and toward his outstretched head. Both riders were urging on the horses by voice. Neither carried whip.

Now they were over the finish line. Henry Stevens straightened. Jones sat back in his saddle, pulling his horse to a stop.

"Whoa, Sunny," ordered Charlie, and that horse stopped.

Jones and Charlie turned and rode up to Henry Stevens.

"Tied race, it looks to me," was his verdict. "When you were over that line it seemed to me from where I stood that Sunlight's nose exactly covered Sultan's. I can't honestly say who won."

He looked at the men grouped around him. They all nodded their agreement with the cattleman's judgment.

"Let's let it go at that," Jones said. "What time did we make?"

Henry Stevens looked at the stopwatch in his hand. Its hands were still merrily going around.

He smiled, chagrined. "I clean forgot to stop it."

The cowhands laughed.

"It doesn't matter," said Jones. He was a good sport. He turned to Charlie, beside him on Sunny. "That's a great horse. He was running faster at the finish than when he started."

"I couldn't help him much," replied Charlie. "Now I see what you mean by getting weight off those back muscles. I could feel Sunny's working under me as he ran."

30

The First Sale

The spring round-up was finished. Back at the home ranch Charlie decided that he ought to train Sunlight to carry a stranger.

"Don't do it," Helen advised. "I think that's a cute habit."

Charlie considered the matter from that angle for a minute. "Well," he concluded, "I guess I won't do anything about it just yet. To tell you the truth, I rather like it myself. And it doesn't make much difference when I'm here all the time. But what if I should be away?"

"He would probably let me ride him then," said the girl.

"Let's ride down to the polo field," suggested Charlie. "It ought to be in shape to use a little now. I hope the grass has been kept down while I've been on the round-up."

"Well, it could be a lot worse," he decided, as he galloped Sunlight over the springy turf. "It may get pretty hard and dry this summer but I can't help that."

On the next day he was practicing again. It was he, not Sunny, who needed to acquire more polo skill. The horse already knew about all a horse can learn without actually playing the game. Charlie began breaking in some of the other likely animals to the work with mallet and ball. He soon had three of them so that they were well schooled.

Then one day his father showed him a letter he had received asking if he had any polo prospects for sale.

"What shall I say, son?" he asked. "That's in your department."

"Who wrote that letter? Where does he live?" inquired Charlie in his turn.

"St. Louis," said Mr. Stevens.

"Write him about those two bay horses and the gray mare I'm working on. They are nothing to be ashamed of," Charlie replied.

The outcome of the correspondence was a visit from two young men, captains of rival polo teams. Each bought a bay horse, paying six hundred dollars apiece for them. That is a high price for a horse direct from the ranch. These bays were Arrow's offspring, therefore

half thoroughbred. The polo players were particularly pleased with the bays' light mouths and quick response to commands.

Charlie's father had kept in the background during the deal. "Call me in if there is any question," he advised. "Otherwise it's up to you."

The two buyers had looked up the Crescent Ranch's reputation so they knew they were taking the smallest possible chance when they bought the bay horses.

"I wouldn't bother much with that gray mare," they advised Charlie. "Her shoulders are too light for polo. She is very handy, though, so if she is good-natured, you might get two hundred dollars for her." The polo players admired Sunlight without stint. "That's the sort you find once in a lifetime. I see there is no use asking if you'll sell him. We couldn't afford him anyway."

It was a little difficult for the boy to see why one of the bays was worth three times as much as the pretty gray mare.

"That's the thing I must learn," thought Charlie. "Well, I guess Dad won't say I did badly."

And Mr. Stevens said, "Fine work. That money goes in the bank to help pay for your college education. Your round-up money goes with it."

Charlie had thought but little about college. He dreaded the idea of leaving the ranch. But he was growing up.

31

On a Camping Trip

Charlie wanted to start three more Crescent Ranch horses on polo training after his good luck with the two bays. His father owned, all counted, as many as sixty or seventy horses, ranging in age from the spring colts to old broodmares in their twenties. Yet as he rode out over the range to look them all over he was surprised to see how few measured up to the requirements of present day polo. He searched for prospects about fifteen and a half hands high. They must show signs of speed, the more the better. They needed strong short backs with properly rounded ribs to hold a saddle where it should be held. Many a polo pony plays with a breast plate, and with straps attached to the saddle to keep it from slipping to the rear. But a horse with that conformation wouldn't be worth training. And a good prospect must possess legs heavy enough in bone to stand all the stress and strain of sudden stops and quick turns.

Charlie soon saw that the typical thoroughbred was too long and slender in the legs to be quick enough in turning or stopping. The strain would be liable to make them become unsound before long. He saw, too, that the average cow pony was too heavily built and likely not to be fast enough. The more he studied the type, the more firmly convinced he became that his Sunlight combined all the qualities needed in a polo pony. In him were the characteristics of both the cow pony and the thoroughbred. Well, Arrow's foals were promising, but he couldn't tell about them yet. Since the broodmares came from many sources the foals might show much variation.

Of the three horses Charlie was beginning to train, only one showed the quality the bays had displayed. He turned the other two out on the range and concentrated on the one, a brown with a white blaze and two white stockings. The work fascinated him and he worked each day. With Hank's help he taught the brown how to "ride off" another horse; that is, to run against him at an angle and so cause his rider to get off the line of the ball. Good-natured Sundance came in for a lot of this "riding off" practice. He just took

it as a matter of course, though it couldn't have been much fun for him.

Charlie's polo field was beginning to be the worse for wear when one day Mr. Stevens said, "Let's go for a camping trip. We'll find a spot beside a cold trout stream and enjoy some fishing. This is the jaunt I promised you last winter, Helen. We'll go to the Silver Tip Mountains. There is some pine timber there I want to look over. Will you come with us, Alice?" the ranchman asked his wife.

"I think I'd better stay home. One of us had better be here to keep an eye on things," Mrs. Stevens answered.

"Oh! Jim Scudder can do that," her husband insisted.

"Probably. Well then, I think I'd just enjoy a rest. Though I'll miss you all," she added quickly.

"All right, Mother," the ranchman replied, as he accepted her decision.

It was arranged that Helen, Charlie, and Mr. Stevens, with Hank to act as horse wrangler and general handyman at camp, would make up the party. Each person planned to take his or her favorite mount. Sundance was pressed into service again as a pack horse. He certainly proved to be a jack-of-all-trades. Helen decided to use little Gopher to carry her own small tent and bedding roll.

"That leaves us short one pack horse," said Hank. "I'll have to drive in a few horses from the range. Maybe we can find one among them sensible enough to carry a pack."

But when the ranchman looked over the half dozen wild-eyed animals Hank had shut in the corral he decided that none of them would do.

"They need a couple of weeks of hard work to make them usable," he said. "Well, I'll have to borrow a pack horse from Bert. He's right when he says we can't get along without the kind he raises."

"Sure," Bert said when Charlie telephoned him. "And I'll lend you a light gray so you can find him easy."

Charlie rode to Bert's ranch and returned with a strong pack horse. And two days later the campers started.

It was a two day trip to the Silver Tip Mountains. For the first night out the campers stayed overnight at a ranch house, arriving at their campgrounds about three o'clock of the second afternoon. The spot chosen for camp lay among tall pines with a clear stream less than a hundred feet away. This flowed into a lake of perhaps ten acres in area a half mile below. Helen was for camping by the lake.

"You'll find this a very windy spot," her father told her. "I know a good place upstream a short distance."

Helen unpacked Gopher. Then she announced that since she knew that she would be expected to cook supper she was going to be sure there was something good to eat. She took a fly rod out of a case, got together the required reel line and flies and was away, saying as she left: "I expect to find camp all made when I come back."

Helen was an excellent angler, while Charlie cared very little for fishing. The girl really supplied her family with all the trout they wanted. Much of her fishing she accomplished from Betsy's back. She would simply ride into the Clearwater and cast into the likely pools until she caught enough rainbow or cutthroat trout for a meal. She found the mare better than a boat to fish from. Betsy enjoyed standing in the cool river while Helen fished, but Sunlight hated the water and made all manner of fuss until Charlie rode him out of it.

The boy thought, "It hardly seems possible that Sunny remembers his first day's experience. I guess that can't be. He must just be one of those horses that doesn't like water. Well, I'm not crazy about fishing anyway."

Camp was pitched quickly. Mr. Stevens left that task entirely to the boys, who were willing enough to do the work.

"I'm on a vacation," he said.

Helen came in soon afterward bringing six fine rainbow trout, running from twelve to sixteen inches in length. Hank prepared them for frying with bacon.

"We can have trout every meal," said Helen. "Those were easy enough to catch." But in saying that she counted her chickens before they were hatched. Sometimes she couldn't land a fish though she saw dozens in the clear stream.

The horses were picketed amidst the trees. There was plenty of grass for a few days at least. This time Mr. Stevens brought no oats, thinking that since the campers expected to do only a small amount of riding, their horses could get along very easily on grass. After the third day the ranchman thought it was no longer necessary to picket them. Sundance was selected as a bell horse since he had proven himself in that capacity the year before on the spring round-up.

"I don't want to turn out Sunlight in these mountains," Charlie said. "We'll need to keep one horse in camp when we go for the others. He's the horse."

“Let him go in the daytime, son,” the ranchman suggested. “He can be trusted to stay within sight of camp.”

“Yes, I guess that’s right,” Charlie agreed.

And that’s how it worked out. Sunlight almost had to be chased out of camp sometimes. Sundance, the bell horse, stayed close to Sunlight and that kept the entire seven nearby.

Perhaps to many people the days in camp might have seemed monotonous. But never a minute dragged for the four campers. With the lake for swimming, the stream for fishing, and the never ending pleasure and interest of riding the forested mountains, the days were too short. Dawn found everybody astir. At sunset they began to be sleepy. The cool mountain nights made a campfire very pleasant. An hour spent in its warm light was enough to put them all in the mood for bed.

Sunlight seemed to consider himself one of the campfire circle. As the twilight vanished he always came in close and stood quietly behind Charlie. Now and again he would nudge the boy’s shoulder with his soft muzzle.

“It’s hardly necessary to picket you, is it, Sunny?” Charlie would say as he tied the rope around the horse’s neck. “Well, it’s just a little bit safer.”

32

Fire!

A week passed in camp, seven days of perfect weather with never a rain cloud in the sky. The whole summer had been too dry. The streams were low and the fire hazard greater than usual. The Stevens and Hank knew too well the danger of burning the forest ever to take a chance with their campfire. It was never unattended for even a minute. There was always a full bucket of water at hand for an emergency. No one ever thought of leaving camp until every last vestige of a spark had been extinguished with water. And moreover, they always built the smallest fire possible. That is the law of the out of doors.

On the eighth day Mr. Stevens detected a faint smell of wood smoke in the air. The sunlight took on a reddish hue. He felt anxious. Somewhere the forests were burning. Perhaps the fire was as far as a hundred miles away. The wind can carry smoke a long distance on some high air current. It may drift down into a valley far from its source.

"We'll stay near camp today," said Mr. Stevens. The horses, too, were uneasy. They grazed less steadily. Sunlight stayed so close to Charlie he almost got in the boy's way. Twice Weston's gray had to be headed back into the area near camp.

"You had better picket Bert's horse," the ranchman said to Hank. "He's too restless."

At noon the atmosphere cleared. The smell of smoke became hardly noticeable. "That may only mean a change of wind," Mr. Stevens thought.

In the middle of the afternoon three men from the ranch where the campers had spent the first night came up the trail.

"Big fire in the Blue Forest Tract," they announced. "Headquarters 'phoned for help. We knew you were in here so we came to warn you. We must push right on. They are calling for more help."

The three men rode away.

Mr. Stevens was in a quandary. He knew that it was his duty to

help fight the fire. But he had Helen and the two boys to think of. He couldn't leave them in danger. The ranchman caught Tim.

"I'm going to ride up the mountain a way and try to get a view of the country," he said. "I'll be back soon."

But the smoke was so thick toward the Blue Forest Tract that he could see nothing.

"It's a big one all right," he told Tim as he turned back to camp. He made his decision as he rode.

Helen, Hank, and Charlie were anxiously awaiting the ranchman's return.

"Listen, young folks," he said. "I'll have to join that crew fighting the fire. There's not a sign of smoke of any sort between this camp and the Smith ranch. It's too late today to break camp and get out before dark. Besides, I don't think the danger is that bad. But first thing tomorrow I want you to go. Telephone Mother as soon as you reach Smith's.... Make a few sandwiches for me, will you please, Helen?"

The girl quickly did as her father asked.

Then Hank spoke. "Couldn't I go with you, Mr. Stevens? All hands may be needed."

The ranchman considered a minute or two. He knew Jim Scudder himself would be among the first to volunteer. Hank was as big and strong as many a man. His father would have expected him to go also.

"We could manage by ourselves, Dad," Helen said. Charlie seconded her.

"There's a lot of packing to do."

"We can do it," said Charlie confidently.

"All right," Mr. Stevens decided. "Come along, Hank. Sandwiches for two, Helen. Keep the horses picketed tonight, son."

The ranchman and Hank left.

Charlie busied himself getting as much as possible of the camping equipment ready for packing in the morning. Helen prepared supper.

"Feel frightened, Sis?" Charlie asked.

"A little bit," the girl answered truthfully.

Helen and Charlie slept but little that night. An hour before dawn the boy was aroused by Sunlight's whinny. Something must be the matter!

Charlie jumped out of his sleeping bag and looked out of his tent.

The fire was hardly two miles away! A strong updraft had carried the sparks over miles of forest while the children were in their tents.

"Quick, Helen!" Charlie shouted. "Get up. We've got to go."

The girl was out of her tent almost instantly. Charlie's next thought was for the horses, the five still in camp. He turned loose the gray, Gopher, and Sundance. Weston's horse was willing enough to start on the homeward trail but Charlie simply had to threaten Sundance and Gopher with sticks and stones before they would leave. He left Sunlight and Betsy picketed.

"Throw the stuff into the stream!" Charlie shouted as he frantically tried to save the camp equipment. Tents, saddles, pots and pans all went into the water. Helen hurried as fast as her brother. Heavier things were piled on those that would float.

"Maybe we can get them later," Charlie said ruefully.

It had taken them but a short time to tear down the camp. The boy and girl mounted their faithful horses. They were off on a gallop down the trail, along the lake shore and into the forest beyond.

And then they reined up in terror. The pines ahead of them were a blazing inferno.

Charlie wheeled Sunny around.

"Back to the lake!" he shouted.

Sunny and Betsy needed no urging. Back toward the lake they tore.

Helen and Charlie urged their horses into the water. It was deep. They were swimming by the time they were their own length from shore.

"Head for those rocks," Charlie called.

Sunny and Betsy swam strongly. Soon the boy and girl were able to climb from their saddles on to the rocks. These rose above the lake's surface near its middle. There were three, each large enough to allow room for a man. But there was no space for a horse. Perhaps a horse could manage to stand alongside the rocks if there were ledges, or the water was not too deep.

Helen and Charlie scrambled to a firm position. They were safe until help came. But could their horses get a foothold? Boy and girl held their heads by the bridles while Sunny and Betsy vainly tried to find footing. Their hooves struck nothing but the steeply sloping sides of the rocks.

"We'll have to let them go," Charlie said. "Slip off Betsy's bridle."

He unbuckled Sunny's bridle as he spoke and took it off. Helen quickly did the same for Betsy.

Brother and sister sadly watched their horses swim ashore. Helen wept.

Instinct sent the horses toward the shore farthest from the fire. They disappeared into the forest.

"Will we ever see them again?" Helen sobbed.

"I'll trust both our horses to find a way through," Charlie reassured her. "They can take care of themselves."

33

Flight

Meanwhile, what of Gopher, Sundance, and Weston's gray horse?

When Charlie sent them on the homebound trail, their instinct urged them to run. All the wild creatures were fleeing. Deer bounded past them. A black bear lumbered along, making speed despite his clumsy gait. The horses were through the threatened part of the forest and safely on their way home, when Charlie and Helen clambered on the rocks in the lake.

Sunlight and Betsy ran a short distance. Fear overcame them at first and put them in a panic. But soon their intelligence asserted itself. Panic would never save them. Now they must think for themselves. Instinct sent them along the water course down the stream flowing from the lake. There they knew the fire burns more slowly and that the heat would be less intense. They broke again into a run. Flames crackled in the trees ahead of them, but they pressed on.

The horses were racing down the stream now in water up to their bellies. Fire burned down the mountainside. Flames roared through the pine tops above.

Now the stream widened into a beaver pond, a natural fire check. Betsy and Sunny swam. They reached the beaver dam and climbed upon it. Downstream the forest stretched unburned. And a wind arose and blew toward them, slowing the fire's advance.

They were safe!

Sunlight and Betsy galloped for home. Soon they came to the round-up country which Sunlight knew so well. Like a homing pigeon to its loft, he headed straight for the Crescent Ranch. No need to go past the Smith place. He knew a shorter way. Something within him urged speed, urged him to reach home as quickly as possible. Perhaps he was intelligent enough to realize that Charlie and Helen needed help and that the Crescent Ranch was the place to go for it. Yet, had he and Betsy gone past the Smith Ranch, someone would have been certain to have heard or seen the saddled and riderless horses, and rushed to the aid of the two children. And the

telephone would have notified the folks at the Crescent.

But Sunlight could not reason quite that far. He did the only thing he knew,—carry the urgent message to his own people.

Five miles! Ten miles! On and on Sunny ran. At fifteen Betsy began to tire but she gamely held the pace. Five miles more! Still she galloped beside Sunlight. She stumbled occasionally now and her breathing was labored. Sweat darkened her coat from head to croup. Could she make the ranch?

Then suddenly Sunlight swerved sharply. Betsy turned with him. Across the trail stretched a barbed wire fence!

Sunny well remembered this region. He had worked here in the spring round-up. There had been no wire then.

The fence had been built since.

Sunlight was desperate. Well he knew the uselessness of searching for an open gate. Experience had taught him that all fences have gates but that no range man ever leaves one open.

He must now do what he had never even thought of doing before. He must jump the barbed wire!

Betsy watched him as he cantered toward the fence. She watched him gather himself for the leap. And she watched him as he cleared the dangerous wire and galloped onward out of sight.

Her courage failed her. She dared not try the jump.

Fortunate it was for faithful Betsy that she could find no water. And it was fortunate, too, that she went slowly in search of it. Gradually her forced breathing became normal, her sweat-soaked hide dried, leaving her pretty coat streaked with white, a mixture of salt and dust.

Sunlight ran on and on. He, too, now was dripping with sweat. His breathing became more and more labored. But he held to the steady rhythm of his gallop.

Sunny could see the buildings of the Crescent Ranch. Loudly he neighed and neighed again.

Mrs. Stevens heard him. She rushed to the window. She saw Sunlight, head up, mane and tail still streaming.

"Jim!" she called. Her thoughts flashed to her children, to her husband. What had happened?

She ran to the telephone. Though terribly frightened at what she feared might have happened, she forced herself to think calmly. She knew, of course, of the fire. First she called the Smith Ranch, but there she could get no information. Then she called Forest

Headquarters and there she got action.

"Yes," a ranger told her. "There was a bad fire. No, it had circled Silver Tip Lake. That tract had been saved."

Then Mrs. Stevens' calm broke. The voice at the other end of the wire dropped its quiet tone.

"Your son's horse! Saddled! You are sure he was in around Silver Tip? There'll be a plane there at once. One is near that area now. Can't see much on the ground, though, because of smoke. I'll call you back as soon as I learn anything."

Headquarters called the plane by radio. "Drop in low over Silver Tip Lake. Party of four camped nearby. Boy and girl unaccounted for. Father and older boy fighting fire."

It was only a matter of minutes when the Stevens' phone rang again.

"Good news!" said the ranger's voice. "Your son and daughter are perched on rocks in the middle of Silver Tip Lake.... No, not a thing's the matter with them. We'll have some men there in a couple of hours. If they can't swim ashore we will knock a raft together and float 'em in.... Oh, that's all right. It's part of our job."

Mrs. Stevens was crying softly when she went out to look at Sunny.

When Mrs. Stevens had called, Jim Scudder had come instantly. He had taken Sunny to the barn. The good horse was spent. Great gasps heaved his ribs as his lungs strained for sufficient air. He swayed as he stood with legs braced far apart. Jim worked long and hard to bring the horse back to normal.

Deep concern was in Mrs. Stevens' expression as she asked, "Will he be all right again, Jim?"

"Yes, I'm sure he will," the foreman answered. "It may take two days."

Then Mrs. Stevens thought how anxious Charlie and Helen would be to hear news of their horses. She called Forest Headquarters again.

"When you get him, will you please tell my boy that his horse is all right?"

But where was Betsy?

Two days later that mare rolled into the Crescent Ranch yard in state, riding in a truck.

"She seemed a little stiff, ma'am," the truck driver said, "so I thought I'd give her a ride. The boys found her yesterday afternoon

carrying an empty saddle. Hope nobody's hurt."

"No," Mrs. Stevens answered. "I think there were some narrow escapes, but no one was injured. Three horses are still missing."

"Oh! I passed three horses on the road about four miles back: a big gray, a cow horse, and a pony."

"That accounts for everybody, then," said Mrs. Stevens. "Thank you for bringing the mare."

"Here's her saddle and blanket." The driver took Betsy's gear from the front seat and carried them back to the barn, while Mrs. Stevens led the mare.

The Weston gray, Sundance, and Gopher turned into the ranch yard in about an hour. Shortly after that the Smiths telephoned that they were driving over with Charlie and Helen.

"Now if Dad and Hank should appear we could have a happy reunion," thought Mrs. Stevens.

And just before supper those two did appear, tired and travel-stained but happy to know that everybody and every horse were safe and sound.

"We lost our stuff, though," said Charlie ruefully.

"Well, you did what you could. I'd have done the same," his father consoled him.

Next morning the Forest Service called, saying that they were holding the camp equipment. "Wet, but still serviceable."

"We will send a truck for it. Thanks very much," replied the ranchman. He hung up the receiver. "Great boys, those forestry fellows!" he said in admiration.

34

Another Sale

Home once more with school again only a few weeks off!

"Was a fellow's life nothing but school with a few bright spots in it?" thought Charlie. He always felt that way as vacation drew toward a close. And then there would be college. Well, school wasn't so bad once a fellow got started again. That was the hard part, getting started.

Another polo player came to Crescent Ranch looking for a pony. He was an army captain, motoring through the country with his wife. Charlie showed him the brown horse he had been training. The captain shook his head when the boy named his price, six hundred dollars.

"We army people shouldn't try to play polo unless we have a private income," he said. "The government feeds our horses and provides some mounts, but it's fine to own one or two yourself. Well, six hundred is beyond my reach."

Charlie was crestfallen. His first sale had been so easy that he didn't quite know what to do in the present situation. The brown would bring two hundred at the utmost out in the range country. Shipped east with freight and commissions to pay he might bring even less. Just a little polo training seemed to double or treble a horse's value. Then the boy remembered how he combed over his father's herds to find even this one horse suitable to train.

He said, "I'm sorry, Captain. I'll write you if I decide to take less than six hundred dollars. That horse is young, thoroughly gentle and sound, and he has a lot of sense. I'm not a polo player myself, yet, but the horses I work with seem to think I am. Two I sold in the early summer are turning out very well." Charlie was very much in earnest.

The captain looked at Charlie and smiled. "Young man, when you say what you just did about a horse, 'young, thoroughly gentle and sound with a lot of sense,' you've said everything. No horseman would ask for more. The other things come in due course."

"But most of our horses are like that!" Charlie answered in

surprise, thinking of Sundance, Gopher, Betsy, Tim, and dozens of others.

"You're lucky, then," said the captain.

Mrs. Stevens insisted that the Captain and his wife stay for dinner. Her husband was away for the day. She could see that Charlie was disappointed. But since his father kept out of his son's horse deals she decided to do the same. The transaction wasn't mentioned during the meal.

The mailman stopped while dinner was in progress. Afterward when Charlie took the guests to the corral to see Sunlight, she glanced through her letters. There was one from Lt. George Stevens.

"Look for a visit from a Captain Latimer and his wife," George wrote. "I told him about your interesting ranch."

Mrs. Stevens went out to the corral.

"Our cousin, George Stevens, has just written me about you," she said. "I wish you could wait until my husband comes back. Why not spend a day or so with us? We enjoy visitors."

Captain Latimer glanced toward his wife and read acceptance in her eyes. It was she who answered simply, "We would like to do that very much."

Of course, a trip over the range to inspect the Crescent horses was planned for the following day. Charlie saddled the brown for the Captain, giving his wife the little gray mare that he had discarded as a polo prospect. Mrs. Latimer fell in love with that gray.

As goodbyes were said Captain Latimer turned to Charlie. "Everything you told me about the brown is absolutely true. I can find no fault with him. I tell you what we'll do. Mrs. Latimer is stuck on your gray mare. She has a present coming to her from her family and together she and I will buy the mare and the brown and give you six hundred and fifty dollars. Both the horses will have the best of care."

Charlie was perplexed. Two horses for little more than the price of one! The boy caught his father's eye. Mr. Stevens nodded ever so slightly. So that deal was concluded.

"More money in the bank for college," said the ranchman, slapping his son on the back.

"Only the price of the polo pony," Charlie declared. "The mare doesn't count. She belongs to Crescent Ranch."

Mr. Stevens laughed, "Oh, you're running a little business on the

side, eh?"

And Mrs. Stevens said, "I'd call it big business, eighteen hundred and fifty dollars in less than three months!"

But Mr. Stevens had an ulterior motive in wanting Charlie to sell a good horse to the Captain. He had learned that he was an instructor in the Reserve Officers' Training Corps in the college that he wanted Charlie to attend.

Charlie had waited in vain for his father to say he could join the fall round-up. Finally the boy asked him point-blank about it.

"I'm sorry, Charlie," the ranchman said. "It will take you away from school too long. Besides, hasn't enough happened this year?"

Charlie had to be content with that decision.

Now he had no polo prospects to work with, not until Arrow's two-year-olds had grown more mature.

"Don't start them too soon," everybody advised. "Give them time to get some sense."

35

Sunny Goes to the Rodeo

True to his plan Charlie arranged to give extra care to six of the mares who had borne Arrow's foals. He altered the fencing of one of the pastures so as to take in some low cliffs which might shelter the mares and foals from the biting winter winds. He built hay racks in it, and as the winter advanced he planned to feed oats to both mares and foals. He talked his father into having one of the corrals enlarged. And he began working on his young prospects as he had on Sunny when he was a foal. It wasn't long before the colts and fillies responded wholeheartedly to his attention and affection.

Thus the winter passed and the spring green returned. Charlie had collected six promising youngsters coming three years of age. None of them gave him much trouble in the breaking.

Charlie was a husky young man now, strong as a young ox, weighing a hundred and sixty pounds. His polo work was developing fine shoulder and back muscles. Lest he grow lopsided he had taught himself to use his mallet in his left as well as his right hand. And he had developed an almost uncanny accuracy in sending the ball exactly where he wanted. He rode Sunlight when practicing for accuracy. Since he couldn't actually play polo he wanted to feel that he was acquiring skill himself as well as teaching his horse.

Charlie began at first by driving a polo ball at a six-inch post from a distance of fifty feet with Sunny at a walk. When he was able to strike the post with reasonable frequency, he increased his horse's gait to a lope, then to a gallop. All these performances were on a forward stroke. Then he began trying more difficult shots, backhands and cross shots. He placed five or six balls in a row and hit them in quick succession. He was becoming very adept. He kept increasing the distance until he reached about a hundred feet from the post.

When he had mastered that greater distance he suspended a barrel hoop from the pole about ten feet from the ground. Now his object was to drive the ball through the hoop. Sunny's part was to

make every turn, twist, and change of gait with no guidance from the reins. Charlie wanted to control his horse entirely by knee and leg pressure. Sunlight learned what was necessary for him to know long before Charlie became sure of his shot. Sending the ball flying through the hoop was much harder than hitting the post. But in time he achieved that skill, too.

Often he had an audience made up of cowhands and neighbors. Word spread around that he was "a wizard with a polo stick." A manager of a rodeo came to Crescent Ranch to watch Charlie and Sunlight. He was impressed. Here was something new. It might be a good feature to include Charlie's act in the rodeo he was staging in a nearby town.

"Young man," the rodeo man inquired, "what will you take for your stunt? I might use it in River City next week."

Charlie considered a minute. "What will you give?" he asked.

"Twenty-five dollars with trucking costs added," he offered.

"All right," Charlie agreed. "Ten dollars for the use of the ranch truck."

"Keeping it in the family, eh? Well, fair enough. Here's ten dollars to bind the bargain." The rodeo man stripped a bill from a roll nearly as big as a cabbage.

"Maybe that feller's act will be a flop," he thought to himself. "But anyway, it's worth the money to have his horse in the show."

Mr. Stevens laughed when Charlie told him of the bargain he made.

"Turned Sunny into a circus horse? What are we coming to? Well, go to it."

Charlie got Hank to help him take Sunlight to River City in the truck. It was only a fifty mile trip.

The audience cheered when Sunlight entered the arena. They had noticed the hoop hung near the center of it. Netting was fastened around the hoop so that it somewhat resembled a basketball goal. Maybe there was to be some kind of mounted basketball game.

Charlie entered the arena, nothing in his hands, no reins or bridle on his horse. Sunlight galloped around the oval in the orthodox rodeo fashion. He circled it once, while all hands cheered the handsome horse. Then Charlie sat back in his English saddle. Instantly Sunlight dropped to an easy lope. Charlie shifted his left leg slightly to the rear, barely touching Sunny's side. At a sharp

right angle the horse swung toward the center. Charlie made him execute a few figure eights by the same almost imperceptible pressure of his knees or calves.

Then he signaled to Hank, who rode in from the side and handed Charlie a polo mallet. At the same time Hank tossed a half dozen polo balls on the ground. Charlie rode Sunny a short distance from one of the balls, sent him at full speed toward it, and swung his mallet. Like a streak of white light the ball shot through the air straight into the hoop, to be stopped by the netting and fall to the ground. Ball followed ball in lightning succession. An attendant picked them up as they fell and threw them out again into the arena. Sunlight meanwhile galloped or turned or twisted, always keeping the right distance from the ball so Charlie could swing his mallet freely. He and Sunlight gave a fine performance.

Charlie straightened in his saddle, mallet held low to the ground. Instantly Sunny stopped and stood like a statue. The grandstand rocked with applause. Charlie had made a hit—or perhaps it was Sunlight. Many of the onlookers may have thought polo a game for dudes, but they knew skill when they saw it, and always appreciated a fine horse.

The rodeo man paid Charlie his twenty-five dollars. "Your horse is half the show, young man. I'll be calling on you again."

"Next time," said Hank as he and Charlie drove home, "we will bring more balls."

"And paint 'em red, white, and blue," added Charlie.

36

A *Separation*

During the summer for several years after that first performance at River City, Charlie and Sunlight were in demand at rodeos. Charlie valued his horse so highly that he seldom trusted anyone to drive the truck. He always did that himself. During the second year he fitted up a neat trailer for Sunlight and attached that vehicle to a roadster. Each season he was able to sell several polo ponies at a good profit. He made a good deal at the rodeos, for he doubled and then trebled his price. His college bank account grew to a really large figure, more than he would need. Charlie no longer accepted for himself the full sum received for his polo mounts. He insisted that his father take half at least. Charlie wanted to make it two-thirds but the ranchman would not consider that.

Finally the time came for Charlie to leave for Western University, which was located in a town about two hundred and fifty miles away from Crescent Ranch. Sunlight would have to be left behind! How his master would miss him! Well, Charlie knew his horse would have the best of care and would be there when he came home.

Sunny watched Charlie as he drove away, his head over the corral bars quite as if he realized what was happening. There was a lump in the boy's throat. He was silent for a long time.

His father on the seat beside him rested a hand on his son's knee.

"I know how you feel, Charlie," he said. "You're turning a corner. Changes always come."

Freshman year passed swiftly. Charlie was pleased to find that Captain Latimer was in charge of an artillery unit of the Reserve Officers' Training Corps at Western University. Charlie enrolled in the Corps and delighted in the prospect of being able to work with horses to some extent while at college. An expert polo player himself, the captain had organized a team from the men of the Corps. The great majority of the artillery horses were far from promising polo material but Captain Latimer had been able to collect ten or twelve animals that could be used for the game. In the artillery drill they either served as mounts for officers or sergeants,

or were lead teams. The brown horse Charlie had sold to Captain Latimer was easily the best one in the outfit.

"There is no reason why you couldn't have at least two polo mounts down from Crescent Ranch when the season begins," the captain had told Charlie. "Of course, you're coming out for the team?"

"Yes, sir! I'll be out," Charlie answered.

He thought at once of having Sunlight at Western University. What fun! And what admiration Sunny would win. But then Charlie thought of how Sunlight would have to remain tied in a stable most of the time or else be out in a small, crowded corral. No, he cared too much for that horse to take him from the freedom and space of Crescent Ranch. But when spring came his father did send two horses which Charlie had started in training the summer before. Before the term ended Charlie sold one of these horses for his usual six hundred dollars. He found he could combine pleasure and business quite satisfactorily.

As his freshman year drew toward its close, Charlie's impatience to get back to the Ranch increased. Sunlight would be there, and the sweeping, open rangelands and grand mountains with their pines and rushing streams. Life within four walls was not for him. His brief visits during Christmas and Easter time had been very pleasant, but now he would have three whole months in the open with his horses.

Charlie's family met him at the railroad station. His first question was for Sunny. He must know all the details. Mrs. Stevens laughed softly. Sunny had allowed no one to ride him. But the family had not written his master about that and Charlie had forgotten to ask.

The first summer home from college passed for Charlie about as the previous one. He was nearly full grown now, almost as large as his father, a fine upstanding young man nearly six feet tall.

As before, he was asked to show both his horse and his skill with mallet at rodeos. He refused to go to places too far from Crescent Ranch, only accepting engagements where he could make the round trip in a day without too much fast driving.

"Something will happen to Sunny if I don't stop fooling around with him this way," he told himself.

But the money he received kept his bank balance in satisfactory shape. And since he couldn't count on selling a polo pony whenever he wanted to, the money from the rodeos was very welcome. Once

or twice during the summer he had had to entrust the car and trailer with Sunny in it to someone else to drive. Then Charlie was very uneasy and insisted on being called by telephone as soon as Sunlight had returned to Crescent Ranch.

"I know I'm a fool," he said to Hank. "I just can't help it, that's all."

These rodeo appearances had begun to lose their interest for Charlie. He was a little bored by them. He could feel, too, that Sunny had begun to dislike them. Just the same thing over and over again. The horse went through his part mechanically, putting no zest into his work.

"This is my last year of circus stuff," Charlie decided.

The last engagement of the year for a rodeo performance was scheduled for the day before his sophomore year began. The town in which he was to show was only seventy-five miles from Western University. Really against his better judgment Charlie decided to let one of the Crescent Ranch hands drive his car and horse home. It would save him a lot of traveling. He had every confidence in the ranch hand, knowing him to be a careful driver and a good man with a horse. It was senseless to have any misgivings.

Charlie patted Sunlight goodbye.

"See you Thanksgiving, old boy," he said. Then he shook hands with Tom O'Connor, the ranch hand, and started for his train.

Tom set out for Crescent Ranch. He drove carefully and at a moderate speed. For fifty miles he rolled along merrily. Then he came to a sign, "Bridge under Construction. Detour. Drive at Your Own Risk."

And Tom could see that it was a risk. He looked at the couplings. They were all right. Well, it had to be done. He started slowly on the detour, a rough makeshift road over a temporary wooden bridge. He could hear the pounding of Sunny's hooves on the trailer floor as he shifted from side to side to keep his balance. But he knew the horse would not be frightened. He was too seasoned a campaigner for that now. Tom crossed the bridge with a grunt of relief. "Well, the worst is over," he said to himself.

And then the axle of the trailer broke!

Tom examined the damage. Then he opened the trailer door and let Sunny out. He tied him to the side of the car.

"We'll just camp here until somebody comes," he told the horse. "Then we will have a truck sent from the next town. Everybody

around here knows you. Someone will be willing to help us out."

Tom waited two hours but the only car to make an appearance was driven by tourists from the east going in the wrong direction.

Night was coming on. Tom ran the car and trailer clear of the road. He took out Sunny's saddle and bridle and put them on the horse.

"It's one of those English contraptions," Tom said to himself disgustedly, as he lifted the saddle on Sunny's back. "Well, I guess I can manage."

He mounted Sunlight. The horse never moved. Tom pressed his spurless heels into Sunny's sides. That had no effect. Then Tom struck Sunlight with the ends of the reins. The blow had no force. Certainly it didn't hurt the horse, but it took him completely by surprise and he bucked. Tom pitched forward on Sunny's neck. The horse bucked again. Tom hit the ground. Hoping to hold the horse, he held tightly to the reins. Sunlight pulled back. The bridle came off. He was free.

Sunlight ran for a short distance and stopped. He neighed again and again calling Charlie. But Charlie was miles away. The horse circled the truck hoping to see his master. He realized he was not there. Sunlight turned and headed for the mountains. O'Connor watched him disappear.

When Tom fell, he made a big mistake. Had he let go the reins they would have trailed on the ground and Sunny would never have moved. He was a better truckman than he was a horseman.

Sunlight was free! Except for the car and trailer there was no sign of man or his handiwork in sight. The freedom loving strain that the horse inherited from Betsy, his mother, awakened. Tom had left him. He was alone in the wilderness.

The area in which Sunlight found himself was semi-desert. Feed was scant, yet Sunny managed to eke out a meal that night. Water, too, was hard to find, so that night he went thirsty. The saddle began to fret him a little but soon the girths commenced to sag. Sunny was losing weight. Then one day when he rolled, the English saddle slipped around until it hung crazily from his side. He deliberately rolled over on it, tearing a strap through its buckle. The rest was easy. Sunlight was soon rid of the saddle.

Sunlight could have found his way home. He possessed that instinct. But that yearning for freedom grew too strong. He wandered far up into the mountains. For days he saw neither man

nor horse. Occasionally he sighted small herds of cattle, but he avoided these. He was beginning to feel lonesome, however, and would have welcomed the companionship of other horses. Finally he did see them in the distance. But men were on their backs and he would not approach. The men were three Indians from a nearby reservation. Half hidden as Sunlight was by the sagebrush, their keen eyes had failed to discern the superb quality of the horse watching them.

Autumn came and waned. Sunny wandered here and there, never far from an area he had apparently chosen as his home grounds. He had discovered one of the rare water holes in that dry country. A little burro shared it with him. Even sheep seemed to shun the region.

Snow fell but never grew deep. The air was so dry that it evaporated quickly.

It is strange that Sunny should be content to remain month after month in that desolate region. But stay he did, though he could have reached Crescent Ranch with two or three days' steady traveling. Meanwhile Charlie, his family and all their friends, every cowhand and range rider, searched for the horse. Of course the hunt started where the trailer had broken down.

But Sunlight in the first week had put many miles behind him. No motor trails penetrated the region where he roamed. The riders who hunted him failed to go far enough. The reaches of our western lands are so vast that even a horse marked like Sunlight could be lost in them.

Sunny grew gaunt as the winter wore on. He became restless, too, as the sun's warmth gradually increased. He started south, headed away from Crescent Ranch. Once as he traveled he caught a scent he had never smelled before. He shied away instinctively. He never knew that the yellow eyes of a mountain lion had been watching him. He was too big for the lion to attack except in extremes of hunger. In fact, no wild animal ever threatened him.

After several days of aimless wandering, Sunlight at last sighted a band of horses, free wild horses with no rider among them.

He whinnied and was instantly answered. Sunlight galloped toward the herd. The mares and young stock stood watching him approach. A buckskin stallion rushed to meet him, neighing shrilly. Sunlight stopped short, warily facing the oncoming stud. The buckskin's onrush slowed as he neared Sunny. Here was a horse

bigger than he, heavier by two hundred pounds. He was lord of the herd. No horse could join it unchallenged.

Sunlight had had no fights since his encounter as a yearling with Scamp. The stallion was constantly battling to hold his mares. Experience was on his side but weight and strength on Sunny's.

Sunlight gave the buckskin a thorough drubbing and chased the defeated animal from the herd. But the stallion would not leave. He circled back. Presently, after another skirmish or two, a state of armed neutrality was established. Sunny had found companionship. Soon the green grass appeared. His gaunt sides grew round again.

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Among the Indians

As the months wore on Charlie renounced all hope of ever seeing his beloved Sunlight again. He blamed himself for his favorite's loss. He should have driven the truck home. His classwork suffered, his interest in horses waned. He went through the motions of playing polo when the season began, but he cared little now for the game. Still he was a high goal man. The two new horses that his father sent him were good, but his heart was not in their training.

Captain Latimer had a talk with Charlie.

"I know exactly how you feel, Stevens. I've been through the same thing. If we own animals we must accept one fact; that their lives are much shorter than ours and threatened with many more dangers.

"Don't let the loss of that splendid chestnut get you down. Remember there are other good horses. You can find one if you search."

"There couldn't be one as good as he, Captain," Charlie replied. "I raised that horse from a weak little colt. We could almost talk to each other. I wish I thought as you do, sir."

Meanwhile Sunlight really enjoyed life with the herd he had joined. It belonged to Indians on a nearby reservation. But the Indians paid scant heed to their horses. They had found that the white man thought but little of the wiry, undersized, vicious animals. He might buy them for their hides or to can for dog meat. But when it came to buying riding horses, the white man always preferred those he raised himself, even though the Indians were willing to sell at very low figures.

Foals were arriving in the Indians' herd now. Soon they were nearly old enough to brand. A few redskins rode out to inspect their horses. In surprise, they beheld the superb Sunlight among them. Sunlight saw the Indians from a distance and tried to hide himself among the mares. But he was so much taller than they that he failed to gain that end. The Indians rode back to camp and announced

their find. Then they strengthened the trap and the long side wings that led into it.

A brief description of a horse trap might be in place. A corral is built at a point where the lay of the land is favorable for a drive. From the corral opening, long fences are built out, widening like a letter V. In fact a V with the tip sliced off, and a circle drawn in its place, would be a perfect diagram of the usual horse trap. An arrangement is contrived whereby rails can be slid across the opening of the corral after the horses are driven into it.

About a dozen Indians started the drive in the usual way, sending the mares down a wide canyon, until its narrowing valley forced them into the mouth of the trap. Then a rush and wild yelling stampeded the herd into the corral, where it was imprisoned by the bars across the entrance.

Sunny knew what was happening. He had helped to do the same thing himself. He tried to race out into the open, but wild yelling Indians forced him back. Ropes settled about his neck. He was free no longer.

The Indians gazed in wonder at the horse they had caught. They saw his brand, the Crescent.

Well, brands could be changed! That was an old trick. And white legs could be stained, at least for a time. And light colored mane and tail could be dyed darker so that the color would hold long enough for the horse to be sold.

Sunny was thrown and hog-tied. A burly Indian sat on his neck. The horse struggled wildly for he had never been treated this way before. But the Indians knew how to handle horses. Sunny's exertions were in vain. The Crescent brand was altered to look like the propeller of a boat. What could be simpler! Then some dyes were rubbed into the white stockings of Sunny's two forelegs. The hair of his mane and tail were thoroughly soaked with a brown fluid, which left them almost as dark as his body. Only the white blaze on his face and the white socks on his hind legs were left unchanged.

The big Indian rose from Sunlight's neck. The ropes were removed from his legs. Sunlight leaped to his feet, nostrils flaring, the whites of his eyes showing in anger. He charged the Indians. Laughing, they scrambled over the corral fence and dropped to the outside.

Later they gave him hay and water. Sunny drank eagerly, and

munched the hay. His anger vanished. He was too good-natured at heart to hold resentment. And the Indians hadn't hurt him much.

His captors saddled Sunlight and tried to ride him; but true to his old habit, he balked.

"Um!" said the chief. "Sell to white man for big money. Lead him out when buyer comes. He too good for Indian. Brand look like old one in week."

It so happened that in about a week a horse dealer named Daniel Redfield came through the Indian country. Sunlight was shown to him.

"Quite a horse!" he said to himself, but he showed no admiration or special interest.

"Saddle him, ride him," he told an Indian standing nearby.

"You buy him on rope," the chief replied.

Redfield became suspicious. He looked the horse over very carefully. The dyed legs, tail and mane didn't fool him, but the brand did. The redskins had done a neat job.

He liked the horse, and he was especially attracted by Sunlight's confident gentle expression. This was no vicious, mean animal. Perhaps the Indians had stolen him.

"No," they told him. "No. Him come to us. We find him with our mares."

There was the ring of truth in the Indians' words. Redfield decided to take a chance.

"How much?" he inquired.

"One hundred dollar," the chief stated.

"Nope," said the buyer, and turned away.

There is no need of describing the bargaining, but at its conclusion Redfield led Sunny away and left twenty-five dollars in his stead. He loaded the horse in a truck with two others.

Now, if Redfield had not just recently returned from a five years' stay in the Argentine, he might have suspected Sunlight's identity. Newspapers and stock journals throughout the ranch country had carried advertisements for his return. The police had been on the lookout.

Horses passed through Redfield's hands quickly. He sold them as honestly as possible without much inquiry as to their origin. He knew he had something exceptional in Sunlight. But why had the Indians sold him so cheaply? He found the reason the next day when he saddled the horse and tried to ride him.

"I'll fix you!" said he, "and when I get you fixed, I think I'll keep you for a while until I find a millionaire who can pay what I think you are worth."

He tied Sunlight in a shed for two days and fed him very lightly. Then he saddled him and led him a little distance away while another man poured a measure of oats into a manger in the shed. Then Redfield mounted and rode Sunlight into the shed.

The spell was broken. Sunny had carried a stranger. Redfield had insight enough to understand him.

Redfield considered a polo game an excellent place to try to sell a horse. He drove Sunny in a truck to the town where Western University was located. Then he saddled him and rode out to the field.

Hundreds were watching the polo game between Western University and a very well known eastern college. The game would decide the collegiate championship. The game stood six to five in the Easterners' favor at the end of the sixth period. Charlie Stevens was playing as he had never played before. He was easily the best player on the field. But his teammates failed to measure up to the Easterners in ability, and the visiting team rode faster horses. Charlie had worked two Crescent ponies for two periods and was planning to use one a third time. He needed speed, and the artillery horses hadn't it to give.

The seventh period started. At top speed the play began. The ball rolled past Charlie, toward the rival goal. It was a perfect set up for a score. Charlie raced to make the shot. A hard riding Easterner was close behind him. He poised for the swing. And then! The horse beneath him slipped, went down on his knees, recovered himself, and galloped gamely on. But he had hurt himself. He limped badly.

At once the referee's whistle blew. The game stopped. Time was counted out, and the players waited while another pony was brought to Charlie.

Helen was watching from the side. She had come from the ranch to see her brother play. She was wild with excitement at Charlie's chance to tie the score. She nearly cried when he lost his shot.

Now what could Charlie ride? Not a horse was left equal in speed to the Easterners' ponies. The game was as good as lost.

Then Helen felt a horse's soft muzzle against her shoulder, his warm breath on her arm. She turned, and gasped in astonishment.

"Sunny!" she cried. And the horse whinnied very softly in

answer.

Then Sunlight saw Charlie across the field. He raised his head and sent his glad neigh ringing to him.

Charlie heard. He stood transfixed. Then he leaped into action.

"Give me that horse!" he almost yelled at a teammate standing near, holding his pony by the bridle.

Charlie raced across the field. Redfield dismounted. Sunlight was pawing the turf, begging to be turned loose.

"Let him go!" Helen almost ordered.

Sunlight fairly flew to meet Charlie. Charlie flung himself from the borrowed pony. He clasped his arms around Sunny's neck and buried his face in the beautiful mane.

Cheer after cheer rose from the spectators, and from the players. They knew Sunlight and knew his story. He had come back!

Charlie finished the game on Sunlight. The horse ran as if his feet were wings. Charlie tried impossible shots and made them. Never mind the score. Western University won.

Conclusion

Following the law of the range, that horses and cattle lost or stolen must be returned to their rightful owner, Redfield gave up Sunlight without question. Charlie insisted on reimbursing him for the twenty-five dollars paid the Indians.

Redfield laughed as he took the money. “It serves me right. I knew there was something not quite in order when I bought your horse.” He shook hands with Charlie and departed with no hard feelings.

And now Sunlight is at Crescent Ranch to stay. Charlie vows that there will be no more rodeo performances and no more polo games with their attendant risks. Sunlight, like Betsy before him, is more than content to remain at home. He has had his fling at freedom.

But he is still *Top Horse of Crescent Ranch*.

By Howard L. Hastings

Animal Life in the Wilderness
Watch, Shepherd of the Range
General Douglas MacArthur
Top Horse of Crescent Ranch

About the Author

Howard Livingston Hastings was born December 19, 1887, in New York City to James Sibley Hastings and Annie Hazard Egbert. Hastings was best known as an illustrator, but he wrote four children's books over the course of his career.

In 1898 the family moved to Westfield, New Jersey. Howard graduated from Westfield High School ten years later. In June of 1911, at the age of twenty-three, he started studying at the Art Students League of New York.

In 1913 Howard began selling illustrations for children's books published by the Cupples & Leon Company. His artwork appeared in various mainstream magazines, such as *Field & Stream* and *Boy's Life*. He became a founding member of the Westfield Art Group, which still exists to this day.

Hastings enlisted and served overseas with the United States 312th Engineers Corps during World War I. During his service, he gained a solid understanding of horses and mules, as they were the primary power source for construction projects. After being honorably discharged in 1919, Mr. Hastings quickly developed a reputation as a western wildlife artist. His cover paintings appeared on *Western Story*, *Action Stories*, *Lariat*, *Ace-High*, *Fawcett's Triple-X Magazine*, *Complete Western Book*, and other pulp magazines.

In 1936 he married Nellie Perkins, a New Jersey public school teacher. They had no children. That same year, he wrote and illustrated his first book, *Animal Life in the Wilderness*.

In 1945 he and his wife left Westfield and moved to Gillette, New Jersey, where they lived near the Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge. Howard L. Hastings died at the age of sixty-seven on March 20, 1955.

—excerpted and adapted from the "Howard Livingston Hastings

Biography," askART.com; David Saunders, "Howard L. Hastings," PulpArtists.com, 2017; and "Howard L. Hastings" (obituary), *The New York Times*, NYTimes.com, March 22, 1955.

About this Book

Top Horse of Crescent Ranch was written and illustrated by Howard L. Hastings. The single interior illustration is a frontispiece painting; this artwork was also used for the book's dust jacket. This title was first published as a hardcover in 1942 by the Cupples & Leon Company. No further vintage print editions are known.

Description

When Helen Stevens and her brother Charlie discover a newborn range colt in danger of drowning on their father's Wyoming ranch, the children immediately set about a daring rescue. The colt is named Sunlight, and Charlie trains him to be an all-rounder: Sunlight learns to handle cattle, race, and eventually become a crack polo pony.

Source & Particulars

The cover painting and story text are from the 1942 Cupples & Leon Company first edition hardcover of 248 pages. The chapters are styled similar to the 1942 print edition.

The cover and title page images are close approximations of the originals. The author bio is added content.

Some inconsistencies in the print edition involving spelling, capitalization, or hyphenation were corrected. The story text has been slightly modernized in this manner: various word pairs were replaced with the modern compound words. As an example, "red-winged black birds" was changed to "red-winged blackbirds." Eight transition markers were added for instances of time passage or scene changes. Details of these changes may be seen in the "Notes" section of the main stylesheet.

Colophon

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